

BOOKS, ARTS & MANNERS

Rise of a Monster

RICHARD LOWRY

Hitler: 1889–1936: Hubris, by Ian Kershaw (Norton, 845 pp., \$35)

HITLER has become the dark center of philosophical, historical, and psychological debates that swirl and double back on themselves until there are debates about the debates and Hitler himself becomes the obscured. In his survey *Explaining Hitler*, Ron Rosenbaum illustrates this phenomenon by reproducing a chart of dizzying complexity designed to prove, through the price and size of gauze at the time, that Hitler's dying mother was overprescribed iodoform by a Jewish doctor (thus engendering a genocidal grudge in her son). The other extreme is represented by filmmaker Claude Lanzmann—deliciously skewered by Rosenbaum—who rejects any attempt to explain Hitler and the Holocaust as a desecration (and not just of the historical fact, but of his film *Shoah*).

In the first installment of his two-volume biography, Ian Kershaw bypasses the grand philosophical musings and explanatory muddle with a straightforward narrative of Hitler's rise. To the confounding question, How could it happen?, Kershaw has a basic, implicit answer: politics. Hitler wasn't a demonic apparition or a product of historical inevitability, but a gifted demagogue and hater who through force of circumstance, the ineptitude of his opponents, and his own sharp political instincts bullied his way to power. Kershaw's *Hitler* is the "outside story," an account terrifying exactly because it seems so frankly possible.

As a young man, Hitler was already a frustrated egomaniac, seized with gran-



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Adolf Hitler as an infant

diose dreams he had neither the talent nor the discipline to realize. (His work habits never changed—in the 1930s, his agriculture minister once spent two years trying to win an audience with him to discuss policy.) As a penniless artist in Vienna, he consumed the gutter anti-Semitic press and fevered nationalist politics of that city, his views hardened in the wake of World War I, and by the mid 1920s he was the dangerous thug with four or five fixed, murderous ideas he would take all the way to his bunker in 1945.

With Hitler, the outside story is almost all that exists. "He doesn't smoke," complained one Nazi official, "he doesn't drink, he eats almost nothing but green stuff, he doesn't touch any women! How are we supposed to understand him to get him across to other people?" Even in private, people got the sense he was acting, and his relations with women were always bizarre (older women tended to make him gifts of dog whips, young girls to attempt suicide over him). In the army, where he was the happiest, Hitler had just one close friend: a dog. "I liked him so much," he recalled. "He only obeyed me."

Kershaw's Hitler has one talent: rab-

ble-rousing. He was "discovered" in 1919 when he and other soldiers were attending a right-wing indoctrination session in the wake of the brutal crushing of the Bavarian socialist revolt (in a trick of right-wing politics throughout this period, the socialists or Jews or whoever were blamed for the violence attendant upon their own repression). After one of the lectures, Hitler was haranguing fellow students about the Jews when an instructor noticed his animated speaking style. Soon, he was giving talks to fellow soldiers, then attending and quickly dominating meetings of a tiny proto-Nazi party.

The Hitler style of politics never changed: It was all agitation, all propaganda, all mobilization toward the goal of power. Vivid posters announcing the early Nazi meetings were supposed to provoke the Left into attending (Hitler himself designed the striking party banner with the swastika in a white circle on a red background). The presence of opponents made for an electric atmosphere and the possibility of violence, which in turn would win the party attention and hence more crowds.

Hitler himself was almost entirely a creature of crowds. Early on, the celebrated party speaker refused an invitation to address a wedding: "I must have a crowd when I speak. In a small intimate circle I never know what to say." But for all his dependence on the mass, Hitler had only contempt for it. "The broad masses are blind and stupid and don't know what they are doing." "For the crowd, 'understanding' is only a shaky platform." "What is stable is emotion: hatred."

The nature of Hitler's politics—as well as his impulsive temperament—dictated his recklessly aggressive tactics. Because his supporters couldn't stay perpetually agitated—and his storm troopers couldn't stay perpetually restrained—

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Hitler was always in a position of having to use it or lose it. This prompted the ridiculous putsch in 1923. The brief loss of momentum while he haggled over the terms of the chancellorship in 1932–33 threatened the Nazi movement, and even once in power he felt compelled to push one risky foreign-policy adventure after another to keep his forward motion. Hitler's frequent suicide threats perfectly complemented his politics—all or nothing.

Despite the perpetual motion, Hitler himself never much changed. There he is, at the beer-hall putsch, excitedly brandishing a pistol like a gangster, holding his political opponents at gunpoint. And there he is as Reich chancellor—leader of a great European nation—still brandishing his pistol during the Night of the Long Knives, spittle on his lips as he promises to have his opponents shot (and quickly following through on the threat). Murder is a theme throughout, from the exterminationist anti-Jewish rhetoric at the very beginning, to the putsch, to his public support for Nazi murderers even as he was poised on the brink of power, to his murder of members of the Reichstag in 1934, which the rest of that body took with equanimity, indeed cheered.

It should have been clear all along what Germany was getting in Hitler, and in any civilized nation his career should have been disqualifying. Without the economic crisis, it would have been in Germany. Instead, the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic was washed away from the right and the left, and power brokers among the army and conservative politicians, who had played footsie with Hitler even back before the 1923 putsch, looked to him to bring popular backing to the authoritarian regime they hoped, but couldn't quite manage, to establish themselves.

Hitler, who understood power in a way they didn't, quickly overmatched the wise men who had hoped to box him in. Within a matter of months, crucial centers of opposition had been swept away, and most Nazi thuggery, in the name of "order," enjoyed popular backing. The enormity of the Holocaust—its techniques and its ambition and its otherworldly cruelty—will always provoke a horrified sense of mystery and the aching need for explanation. On the

other hand, it's not necessarily so mystifying that a band of ruthless criminals, once in possession of state power, should set about on a program of murder. The men who negotiated Hitler into power refused to reckon on this. Their part in *Hitler* makes it not just a tale of evil ascendant, but of the awful price of politics practiced poorly. **NR**

Writing Unafraid

JAY NORDLINGER

A Passion for Truth: The Selected Writings of Eric Breindel, edited by John Podhoretz (HarperCollins, 230 pp., \$25)

WHEN Eric Breindel died a year ago, he was accorded something like a state funeral. Politicians, tycoons, and scholars all mourned a singular talent, whose influence had been great. You would have thought a major figure had passed from our midst. Indeed, one had.

Breindel was a journalist—only a journalist—but he scribbled with a purpose. From his perch at the *New York Post*, he attracted controversy, scorn, and intense admiration. His style was both erudite and blunt. In his causes, he was unrelenting. He was an Everest of indignation, still inveighing while others had given out. Breindel proved just what an opinion writer can accomplish—provided he has the will, intelligence, and guts.

Now there is a collection, edited and introduced by John Podhoretz (who succeeded Breindel as the *Post's* chief editorial voice). Here we find some 70 of Breindel's columns, reflecting his three main concerns, or obsessions, as Podhoretz admiringly calls them: anti-Communism, New York City, and the Jews. Like all true teachers, Breindel never hesitated to repeat himself. His work is enough to give obsession a good name. We see that he dedicated his career to an awesome

task: memory-keeping and myth-destroying.

Breindel was a dream of an anti-Communist. He was gloriously unafraid of the cry "Red-baiter!" He called a Communist a Communist when nothing was more impolitic, and he shamed those who refused to do likewise. He was a sort of hunter, a Simon Wiesenthal sniffing the terrain for Stalin's friends—and Hitler's, and Arafat's—demanding that they be held accountable for what they were.

Even when the Soviet Union expired, Breindel would not desist. If necessary, he would use his column to conduct his own little Nuremberg trials. Was David Duke exposed as an ex-Nazi in Louisiana? Fine: But what about the ex- (or maybe not so ex-) Communists holding office in New York? When most Americans couldn't tell Gus Hall from Monty Hall, Breindel kept a sharp eye on the CP-USA, whose capacity for mischief he always considered underrated.

He would not let Kim Philby die in peace. Oh no. He remembered the Albanians the traitor had caused to die on the beach (and if he were writing today, he would not turn away from the slaughter of other Albanians in Kosovo). He could have his fun with Reds and their fellow-travelers, like the absurd Joel Kovel, Alger Hiss Professor of Social Studies at Bard College (really). But he would typically add, "Before we laugh too hard," reminding us of the inhumanity of the Communist enterprise.

With the release of the Venona papers (Soviet cables), Breindel had another batch of columns to write (plus a book). He wanted Americans to face "the dread notion that some things are true even though Richard Nixon or Joe McCarthy said they were." He would not take a holiday from Hiss or the Rosenbergs or I. F. Stone or J. Robert Oppenheimer (who even today is scandalously untouchable). Neither would he allow lies about Paul Robeson to pass unchallenged, even in the interests of black-Jewish relations.

It's not that Breindel was intolerant, snitch-minded, and unforgiving. It's that he abhorred dishonesty, and revered

