

# Dapim

STUDIES ON THE HOLOCAUST

Volume 32, Issue 2, 2018

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Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust



THE INSTITUTE FOR  
HOLOCAUST RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF HAIFA  
AND THE GHETTO FIGHTERS'  
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# Dapim

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THE HOLOCAUST

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## INTRODUCTION

### Scholars Forum: Thomas Weber's *Becoming Hitler*

Gavriel D. Rosenfeld

Given the countless studies that have been published about the life and career of Adolf Hitler, it may seem that nothing new can be said about him. But nothing could be further from the truth. Changing times routinely shape the concerns of historians, and so it should come as no surprise that the recent surge of right-wing populist movements throughout the Western world has stoked people's interest in understanding the origins of the Nazi leader's political extremism. Thomas Weber's new book, *Becoming Hitler* (originally published in 2016 in German as *Wie Adolf Hitler zum Nazi wurde*) contributes significantly to this task by examining Hitler's political evolution in the key years between the end of World War I in 1918 and the ill-fated Munich Beer Hall Putsch of 1923. As was true of his previous study, *Hitler's First War*, Weber marshals new empirical evidence to present convincing conjectures about how Hitler developed from a largely apolitical war veteran into the fanatical leader of the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP). In so doing, Weber helps us to better understand the circumstances that can lead to the radicalization of otherwise ordinary human beings.

In order to facilitate a broader discussion of the book's findings, the editors of *Dapim* invited three prominent Holocaust historians to discuss Weber's book: Harold Marcuse (University of California, Santa Barbara) praises Weber's empirical analysis of Hitler's ideological evolution while asking how it might be supplemented by further attention to his personal life. Mark Roseman (Indiana University) examines Weber's assertion that Hitler's antisemitism stemmed from anti-capitalist, rather than anti-Bolshevik, impulses and evaluates the historian's neo-intentionalist claim that Hitler's genocidal beliefs can be traced back to the early 1920s. Richard Steigmann-Gall (Kent State University) raises the possibility that Hitler's ambiguous political allegiances in the immediate aftermath of World War I may be better understood by drawing on Zeev Sternhell's claims about fascism being 'neither right nor left' and comparing Hitler to other interwar figures, such as George Sorel. Weber responds to these three reviews with his own detailed commentary.

The scholarly conversation succeeds brilliantly at thematizing major issues pertaining to the turning points of Hitler's political evolution. In so doing, the discussion touches upon the counterfactual question of what might have been. Could Hitler have evolved in a different political direction – or no political direction at all – had post-World War I circumstances been different? Weber's book implies that the answer is yes. In fact, he explicitly highlights key moments when history might have turned out otherwise. For instance, if only Hitler had had a family to go home to at the end of World War I and not felt compelled to stay in the army as long as possible by resisting demobilization and successfully running for the position of *Vertrauensmann*, he would not have

discovered his 'talent for leadership.'<sup>1</sup> If only the Catholic journalist and staunch opponent of antisemitism Fritz Gerlich had not been 'too busy to accept the invitation to head the [army-sponsored, anti-communist propaganda] courses' taken by Hitler in the summer of 1919, the impressionable war veteran 'would have been exposed to a very different course' and potentially avoided an antisemitic turn in his thinking.<sup>2</sup> If the Bavarian interior minister, Franz Xaver Schweyer, had only followed through on his desire to expel Hitler from Bavaria in 1923, the Nazi party leader would have faced the prospect that his 'political career would collapse like a house of cards.'<sup>3</sup> Or, most dramatically, if Hitler had not experienced car trouble while attempting to escape back to Austria after the failure of the Beer Hall Putsch in November 1923, 'there would have been no trial and no incarceration in Landsberg, and more likely than not, he would be today nothing but a footnote of history.'

These and other instances remind us about the importance of chance and contingency in historical events. They tell us that Hitler was not inevitable. They help us to remember that no amount of vigilance is superfluous in the effort to safeguard liberal democratic norms from external assault.

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Weber, *Becoming Hitler: The Making of a Nazi* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), pp. 42–3.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 271.



## The Political Without the Personal

Harold Marcuse 

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What is there new to say about Hitler? The United States Library of Congress subject heading for Hitler's biography lists between 10,000 and 20,000 unique titles, depending on language and other filters. Since Ian Kershaw's mammoth 1600-page biography<sup>1</sup> was published in 1998, massive biographies by Volker Ullrich<sup>2</sup> and Peter Longerich<sup>3</sup> have integrated new findings, probed new source material, and attempted new syntheses and interpretations. Detailed investigations into specific phases and aspects of Hitler's life and activities have found more sources and added depth to our understanding of the German dictator's thoughts and actions. One of the most important among those is Weber's 2010 book *Hitler's First War*, which drew on hitherto unused records of Hitler's regiment and documents of its members to answer open questions and debunk longstanding misconceptions about Hitler's wartime service. Among its important results was proving that Hitler had given no indication of harboring any ill feelings toward Jews during those years.

Out of more than a dozen other recent scholarly works about Hitler worthy of mention,<sup>4</sup> I single out Othmar Plöckinger's 2013 monograph<sup>5</sup> about, as its subtitle puts it, Hitler's crucial years in the German military, from 1918 to 1920. In many ways, Plöckinger builds on and extends Weber's World War I analysis into the postwar period. In the footnotes of Weber's *Becoming Hitler*, we see his dialogue with Plöckinger and other recent biographers, in which he discusses and corrects misinterpretations. To offer just one example, Weber debunks Hitler's widely accepted claim in *Mein Kampf* that he, along with his closest dispatch runner companion, Ernst Schmidt, volunteered for guard service at the Traunstein camp for Russian POWs in early December 1918 because he was 'disgusted' by the Munich soldiers' councils.<sup>6</sup> This example is especially instructive because it illustrates Weber's approach and the contribution this book makes to our understanding of how Hitler the drifter came to be Hitler the ideologue and dictator. Weber lays out the case that the two friends instead found this a convenient way to stay in the Bavarian army, even as it continued to co-govern with the new Social Democratic leadership and its short-lived Communist successor.

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<sup>1</sup>Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936: Hubris* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), and Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–1945: Nemesis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998).

<sup>2</sup>Volker Ullrich, *Hitler: Ascent, 1889–1939*, trans. Jefferson S. Chase (New York: Knopf, 2016).

<sup>3</sup>Peter Longerich, *Hitler: Biographie* (Munich: Siedler, 2015).

<sup>4</sup>Ullrich, *Hitler*, p. 761ff, n. 31, catalogs these new works.

<sup>5</sup>Othmar Plöckinger, *Unter Soldaten und Agitatoren: Hitlers prägende Jahre im deutschen Militär 1918–1920* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2013).

<sup>6</sup>Thomas Weber, *Becoming Hitler: The Making of a Nazi* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), pp. 14, 347, n. 29.

Each chapter draws on a careful explication of previously underused and important new source material to advance an argument about Hitler's political development. In the opening chapter, Weber argues convincingly that between his late-November 1918 return from the Pasewalk military hospital to Munich via Berlin and his return from Traunstein by 12 February 1919, Hitler was basically attempting to stay in the army at all costs, even as it became increasingly more left-leaning under post-Kaiser Social Democratic and then Jewish Communist leadership. In this chapter, along with the one following it, Weber makes the most detailed and convincing case to date that Hitler's story of his epiphany in Pasewalk, upon hearing the news of Germany's defeat, regarding becoming a politician is pure fiction. Reconstructing Hitler's whereabouts and activities week by week during this period, based, for example, on local newspaper reports, along with both 'gray' and published local memory literature in the Traunstein city museum and archive, led Weber to the conclusion that May 1919 marks the starting point of Hitler's proverbial road to Damascus to become an apostle of antisemitism.

Weber's careful analysis in this micrological crawl through Hitler's life in 1919 allows him to demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt that Hitler was very comfortable in the Social Democratic milieu of revolutionary Munich up until and during the establishment of a Bavarian Soviet Republic after Kurt Eisner's assassination in February. Weber argues that three events that spring began Hitler's path in politics. The first was his assumption, for the first time in his life, of a position of responsibility, namely as *Vertrauensmann* (delegate, literally 'person of trust') of his military unit to the revolutionary Munich government. Among his responsibilities was picking up weekly propaganda briefings and announcing them to his regiment. Weber makes the case that Hitler began feeling his oats in this position and chose to serve the increasingly radical left-wing government instead of leaving the army, as his pal Schmidt had decided to do. Five days before his 30th birthday, Hitler stood for election as *Bataillons-Rat*, winning the second-highest vote count, thus becoming vice-battalion councilor of his unit.

The second crucial event was the violent defeat of the Bavarian Soviet Republic in early May. Having just escaped arrest by the 'Reds' on April 27,<sup>7</sup> Hitler and his barracks-mates were rounded up by the counterrevolutionary 'Whites' on May 1. In the volatile situation following the White takeover of the city, Hitler urgently needed to distance himself from the extreme left-wing government he had just served, even if only perfunctorily. In fact, possibly with the help of an officer who knew him from his messenger service at the front, Hitler was released and became an informer, serving the new right-wing government by exposing fellow soldiers who had actively supported the Bavarian Soviet Republic. He was so successful in this job that he was selected first to attend, and then to give, lectures designed to steer former soldiers away from Communist leanings and toward nationalist sentiments. This reviewer finds this explanation for Hitler's radical reversal in the context of a political turnaround convincing – it parallels the explanation offered by Jan Gross for the virulence of the antisemitic backlash by some villagers of Jedwabne after

<sup>7</sup>Weber's assessment of previous interpretations of this incident in the text and a lengthy footnote is again noteworthy: see Weber, *Becoming Hitler*, pp. 53f, 353, n. 25.

German troops occupied the town.<sup>8</sup> Gross suggests that those who had collaborated with the previous Soviet occupiers outdid themselves in murdering Jews in order to prove their loyalty to the new German regime.

At this juncture, Weber embarks on a long tangent about the nature of the rapid rise of antisemitic sentiment in Munich after the White takeover. He uses it to set up one of the core arguments of this book: that Hitler's racially based antisemitism was not merely a soaking-up of judeophobic ideas current in Munich at that time (nor of those in Vienna during Hitler's time there in the early 1900s, for that matter), but his own construction, drawing on the ideas of others, yet evolving over time as Hitler sought solutions to what Weber repeatedly stresses was his core goal of ensuring that Germany would be a strong, sustainable nation, never again in danger of being at the mercy of rival powers.

That core goal emerged from the third transformational event for Hitler at that time: the announcement of the terms of the Versailles Treaty on May 7. Although not particularly harsh compared to other victor-imposed settlements, the treaty terms drove home, for the first time, that Germany had truly lost the war. With this interpretation, Weber basically moves Hitler's claim in *Mein Kampf* – that he had become politicized when he heard the news of Germany's defeat in Pasewalk in November 1918 – forward to June 1919. Hitler's streamlined 1925 autobiography in *Mein Kampf* thus neatly excised Hitler's post-armistice period of 'expediency, opportunism, and mild left-wing leanings,' as Weber characterizes this time in Hitler's life.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Weber argues that expediency and opportunism were hallmarks of Hitler's *modus operandi* throughout his career.

Those three events conclude the first part of Weber's book, titled 'Genesis,' before he turns to 'New Testaments,' the second part. Five chronological chapters cover the period from July 1919 to July 1921, each propounding a secondary argument leading toward Weber's ultimate conclusion about how Hitler was formed and formed himself. The title New Testaments, in plural, is a play on words, denoting both foundational gospels as in the Christian bible (Hitler did, indeed, compare himself to Jesus<sup>10</sup>) and a biographical-political manifesto that was continuously revised as Hitler's understanding of the world evolved in the changing waves of Bavarian political tides.

Chapter five charts Hitler's initial ideological solidification as a lecturer and observer of political meetings, with his famous September 1919 'first antisemitic letter,' composed at the behest of Hitler's army handler Karl Mayr, to answer a citizen's inquiry about the Bavarian Social Democratic government's stance vis-à-vis antisemitism. Weber again digresses from biography to explicate the formation of Hitler's ideas about Jews. He makes a case that Hitler's 'quest to build a Germany that was resistant to external and internal shocks' was his primary goal, with his antisemitism and racism only emerging as means to that end, rather than as goals in themselves.<sup>11</sup> Further, Weber lays out evidence that Hitler's antisemitism at this time was, in contrast to mainstream Bavarian antisemitism, primarily anti-capitalist, but not yet anti-Bolshevik. What Weber fails to

<sup>8</sup>Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 152–163 ('Collaboration').

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 68. Hitler's 'expediency and opportunism' are a kind of mantra for Weber; compare pp. 41, 43, 64, 67, 81, and so on, and the index entry 'Hitler, Adolf, Opportunism/Expediency of' on p. 415.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 286.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 123.

explain, which is a major shortcoming of this book, is what triggered the unheralded outburst of full-blown antisemitism in that key 1919 letter.

Before he returns to this question, Weber walks his readers through Hitler's discovery of a 'New Home' (chapter five) in the nascent German Worker's Party (DAP) to the resolution of 'Two [divergent] Visions' (chapter six) of the party as a secretive, elite, right-wing vanguard, as opposed to a mass, populist movement. Needless to say, Hitler's latter vision won out. Explicating the well-known February 1920 official program of the newly renamed National Socialist DAP (NSDAP) and Hitler's speeches of the time, Weber notes that neither that party nor Hitler's answer to the national security question was anti-Bolshevik yet, nor was either interested in imperial-expansionist *Lebensraum*.

Chapter seven, 'A 2,500-Year-Old-Tool,' then zeroes in on the nature of Hitler's antisemitism and its implications. Beginning with a fake-bearded Hitler flying to Berlin on 16 March 1920, in an open plane with his ideological mentor Dietrich Eckart (at the behest of his army mentor and patron Karl Mayr), vomiting due to fear of heights, and running out of gas on the way, Weber interweaves Hitler's experience of the failed right-wing coup attempt known as the Kapp Putsch with the inception of Hitler's post-army career as a professional politician. The core of the chapter, however, is Weber's analysis of Hitler's widely disseminated three-hour speech on 13 August 1920 to over 2000 listeners, titled 'Why are we antisemites?' Here we find Weber typically nuanced and circumspect in his analysis. He invokes numerous contemporaneous texts to define two variants of antisemitism: one literal, which viewed Jews as racial-biological carriers of social infection who would have to be physically excised from society, and the other metaphorical, seeing Jewishness as an orientation or set of capitalist, anti-communitarian values, which could be held by practitioners of the Jewish faith, but could also be harbored by non-Jews.

Obviously, Hitler was of the former variety, but does that mean that he already envisioned the genocide he launched in 1941? At this point, Weber equivocates, ultimately suggesting that it would take the situation of Germany's success in the war for Hitler to actually envision complete eradication of all literal (racial) Jews. It is worth quoting a key illustrative passage at length:

It is ultimately impossible to know whether Hitler understood his own racial, biologized, all-or-nothing antisemitism to be of a literal or metaphorical kind in 1920 because no one can look into Hitler's head. No degree of ingenuity can possibly fully overcome this obstacle. Even if new documents came to light that were produced by Hitler himself or that had recorded his words, the dilemma is this: because he constantly reinvented himself and was a notorious liar who said whatever he believed people wanted to hear, we can never know beyond reasonable doubt when he told the truth and when he lied. Hence, all we can do is explain why some propositions about his intentions and inner thoughts are more plausible than others, as well as examine his patterns of actual behavior and extrapolate conclusions as to how his mind worked and as to what his intentions were.<sup>12</sup>

Weighing source against source, Weber shows time and again how Hitler modified his verbal positions according to circumstance. Weber then interprets Hitler's actions, as well as they can be reconstructed, to interpolate what Hitler's actual position at that

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 178.

time might have been. In this case, Weber turns to Hitler's treatment of specific 'literal' Jews who played a role in his life to come to a conclusion.

His first case in point is Hitler's longtime bodyguard and chauffeur Emil Maurice, whose close, if not intimate, relationship with Hitler ended in 1927 over Maurice's romance with Hitler's half-niece Geli Raubal. It later turned out that Maurice, SS member number two, had a Jewish great-grandfather, which was the reason the new SS leader Heinrich Himmler, an obsessive racial purist, wanted him expelled from the organization. Still, in 1935, Hitler intervened personally to protect Maurice against Himmler's predations, and Maurice's career in politics and the SS continued. After 1939, however, Hitler broke off contact with him, even ignoring his request for a personal audience. Along with the special protection Hitler later accorded the Jewish doctor who had treated his cancer-stricken mother in 1907, Weber takes this as evidence that Hitler was willing to exempt individual Jews from extermination until early wartime victories enabled him to envision the complete eradication of all Jews as a real possibility. I will return to this inference below.

Weber's next chapters reconstruct how Hitler worked to distinguish himself in the roiling market of ideas that was post-revolutionary Bavaria. His extreme, biologically based, racist antisemitism was one means to that end; styling himself as a 'genius' who, alone, was destined to save Germany was another. His formidable skill as an orator who was able to 'read' his audiences enabled him to sell himself as such to audiences in, and increasingly outside of, Munich. The chapter 'Hitler's Pivot to the East' uses Hitler's close contacts with expatriate Russian monarchists in 1921 to lay out the argument that at this time Hitler saw Britain and the United States as Germany's primary foes, and that an alliance with a future post-Soviet Russia would give Germany the wherewithal to withstand them. Here Weber introduces the notion of conspiratorial antisemitism, which came to Germany with Russian refugees in the form of the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Citing various texts by Hitler, Weber lays out how the demagogue's antisemitism now included an anti-Bolshevik dimension as well (Jews being the string-pullers of Bolshevism), and how Hitler's understanding of world politics shifted from macroeconomic to geopolitical power.

This brings Weber to the final part of his book, whose title 'Messiah' continues the biblical allusions. While this title adequately captures the overarching argument of these five chapters, Weber slogs through the details of the NSDAP's struggles to keep itself relevant and financially afloat during the hyperinflation. He charts Hitler's outmaneuvering of Anton Drexler as head of the populist NSDAP. Hitler was neither a passive actor who almost accidentally slid into leadership, nor a long-term strategist. Rather, his 'political talent lay in defining goals in very broad terms and in his ability to wait for situations to emerge that would allow him to move closer to realizing those goals.'<sup>13</sup> He had an instinctive talent for recognizing and exploiting opportunities as they arose. Along the way, Weber clears up some incorrect beliefs about how the early party funded itself and what Hitler's reading habits were (he disliked the occult and mythic German past, and avoided racial science, while preferring military and historical titles<sup>14</sup>). Bolstering his opportunism thesis, Weber shows how Hitler toned down his anti-Americanism when

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 243–50.

he was exposed to Henry Ford's *International Jew* in 1922 and became close to German-American businessman Ernst Hanfstaengl and his American wife, Helene, a 'German girl from New York.'

Helene's testimony, by the way, is typical of the hitherto unused or underused source material Weber has revived. Although Ernst published several books about his interactions with Hitler, he, Helene, and their son Egon were also questioned and interviewed by Hitler biographer John Toland in the early 1970s. Weber makes extensive use of the notes and transcripts, preserved among Toland's papers in the Roosevelt Presidential Library in New York. Similarly, he makes frequent use of an interview conducted by Munich's Institute for Contemporary History in 1964 with Hermann Esser, Hitler's companion since their common service in Mayr's army propaganda unit. By 1920, Esser had become the editor of the Nazi newspaper, in 1923 he participated in the Putsch, and he remained head of propaganda until 1926, when the Strasser brothers and Goebbels succeeded in displacing him. Nonetheless, he continued in various governmental positions until the end of the war, remaining in personal contact with Hitler. A third example, this time a hitherto undiscovered source, are the papers of Viktor von Koerber at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

Koerber was, as Weber again convincingly interpolates, the writer under whose name Hitler's first autobiographical sketch was published, as the introduction to a collection of speech excerpts in 1923. Weber uses Hitler's ruse of publishing a paean to himself under someone else's name to characterize himself as 'a man with an emerging deep understanding of how political processes, systems, and the public sphere worked.'<sup>15</sup> I cannot help but remark that this statement would apply equally to Donald Trump's instinctive command of the mediasphere today, with the obvious difference that Trump began his public life as an unabashed narcissist, instead of developing into one. In any event, this first, hitherto unrecognized autobiography also illustrates how Hitler was able to use his reputation as a mere 'drummer' to manipulate politicians of national repute, such as Ludendorff, into believing that he was using Hitler as a tool, instead of vice versa.

The final two chapters of Weber's book are its denouement. Weber makes use of the recently published, but contemporary, papers and memoir of Hans Tröbst,<sup>16</sup> Ludendorff's close associate, to narrate the political calculations behind the 1923 Munich Beer Hall Putsch attempt. As in the opening chapters on the Bavarian revolution, Weber again expertly uses vivid contemporary personal testimonies to illustrate the established interpretation that the post-putsch trial in April 1924 transformed Hitler from a small-time political manipulator in Bavaria to a figure of national repute. The last chapter details Hitler's months in Landsberg 'fortress' – a particularly mild form of imprisonment – during which he had time to study political and racial theories while continuing work on his opus magnum, which he had conceived and begun before the putsch attempt.

In a relatively novel approach, Weber employs digital tools to analyze and compare the texts of the 1925 first volume and 1926 second volume of *Mein Kampf*. In this way, he can show how Hitler's preoccupations evolved with political circumstances from 1923 to 1926. In particular, Weber attributes Hitler's recognition, after Lenin's January 1924 death failed to lead to the fall of the Soviet system, that an alliance with Russia would no longer be part

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 288.

<sup>16</sup>Hans Tröbst, *Ein Soldatenleben in 10 Bänden, 1910–1923* (Hamburg: Selbstverlag Mario Tröbst, 2013).

of the matrix ensuring Germany's long-term survival. Instead, Germany would have to subjugate and colonize eastern lands, which Hitler initially termed *Bodenerwerb* (acquisition of land) in draft notes, before he encountered and adopted the concept of *Lebensraum*.<sup>17</sup> While it is clear that Weber did not have time to work through the mammoth 2016 critical edition of *Mein Kampf*<sup>18</sup> with the thoroughness he exercised in the previous chapters, insights from that project's comparison of the various editions of Hitler's political manifesto support Weber's thesis that with the completion of *Mein Kampf*, the meandering evolution of Hitler's ideology was complete.

In an epilogue, Weber addresses the implications of his revisions to Hitler's early biography for our understanding of the origins of Hitler's genocidal vision, which he dates to 1922 or 1923 based on two incidental sources whose obscurity may heighten their validity. The first is a November 1922 letter from a potential patron to Hitler's close associate Rudolf Hess dismissing the idea that one could eliminate Jews with machine guns.<sup>19</sup> Weber takes this as evidence that Hitler and Hess had considered this at the time. The second is a passage in a recently published 1923 interview with Catalanian journalist Eugeni Xammar.<sup>20</sup> In response to Xammar's question whether Hitler, who had told him that he rejected a localized pogrom on grounds of being ineffective because other Jews would still dominate politics, wanted to kill all Jews throughout Germany at once, Hitler elaborated:

That would of course be the best solution, and if one could pull it off, Germany would be saved. But that is not possible. I have looked into this problem from all sides: It is not possible. Instead of thanking us as they should, the world would attack us from all sides. ... Hence only expulsion is left: mass expulsion.<sup>21</sup>

While one might dismiss the first source as overinterpretation, the second confirms Weber's portrayal of Hitler as desiring mass murder, but tempering his wish because of pragmatic concerns, dismissing it as impracticable. It would take another decade and a half before Hitler saw that not only pogroms, but also mass murder were indeed practicable. Hitler's brazen admission belies Weber's own claim in the passage quoted earlier that even if new sources are discovered, it will be impossible to know when Hitler first envisioned genocide. Here we have a 'smoking gun' that indicates that genocide was on the Munich rabble-rouser's mind at least as early as 1922 or 1923.

What implications does this have for our understanding of the genocidal dynamic in Nazi Germany? Weber posits a process of 'confirmation cycles' to synthesize the intentionalist and functionalist explanatory paradigms.<sup>22</sup> Hitler's narcissistic need for acclamation in the hostile Munich political marketplace led him to ever more extreme positions. As his audiences responded to certain ideas, Hitler radicalized his position to receive even more attention. Once in power with those same radicalized goals, the impulse within the cycle reversed: Hitler's followers competed to work to fulfill the wishes of the Führer. This neatly melds the Hitler-focused intentionalist view with the distributed responsibility among Hitler's functionaries.

<sup>17</sup>Weber, *Becoming Hitler*, p. 321.

<sup>18</sup>Adolf Hitler, *Hitler: Mein Kampf, eine kritische Edition*, 2 vols., eds. Christian Hartmann, Thomas Vordermayer, Othmar Plöckinger, Roman Töppel, et al. (Munich: Institut für Zeitgeschichte, 2016).

<sup>19</sup>Weber, *Becoming Hitler*, pp. 278, 332.

<sup>20</sup>Eugeni Xammar, *Das Schlangenei: Berichte aus dem Deutschland der Inflationsjahre 1922–1925* (Berlin: Berenberg, 2007).

<sup>21</sup>Weber, *Becoming Hitler*, p. 332.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 334f.

What more is there to learn about Hitler? Readers of this essay will have noted that I am convinced by most, if not all, of Weber's meticulously researched and carefully argued theses. However, I do think there is a relevant piece missing that prevents us from reaching a fuller understanding of Hitler's drive toward genocide: Hitler's personal life. Most scholarly biographers focus on Hitler's political and ideological development, dismissing his personal life as subsidiary or irrelevant. Weber, too, succumbs to the attraction of avoiding serious engagement, never going beyond the claim that Hitler's 'urge to escape loneliness' drove his opportunism.<sup>23</sup> Other biographers, such as Ron Rosenbaum (*Explaining Hitler*, 1998), Lothar Machtan (*Hidden Hitler*, 2001), and Anna Maria Sigmund (*Hitlers bester Freund*, 2003), focus respectively on his scandal-ridden, litigious activities, his (homo-)sexuality, and his closest personal relationships in the second half of the 1920s. Together they reveal a man who was anything but plagued by loneliness, and each of them has forerunners in Hitler's Vienna years. As convincing as Weber's meticulous and nuanced contextual reconstruction of Hitler's antisemitism after it emerged full-blown in the summer of 1919 is, I think some earlier piece of the puzzle is missing. It may not explain how the Shoah came about, but it would shed light on how the so-called butterfly effect can end up spawning a hurricane of hatred.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

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<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 13, 67, 325.

with the Left – even as they also spoke, in an arguably Sorelian fashion, of the primacy of the nation. But these are only passing moments in Weber's book and tantalizingly do not lead Weber to ask deeper questions about the 'socialism' of National Socialism itself. Had it been Weber's interest to do so, he could have examined not just Hitler and the men immediately around him, but also the broader milieu of early Nazis as such, to reveal whether Sternhell's thesis actually applies to the early Nazi Party. The Strasser brothers Otto and Gregor receive no mention in Weber's book; Goebbels receives cursory mention here and there, but not in the context of his well-known position early in the party's history as a 'left Nazi'; and the DAP's party program, which would later become that of the NSDAP, is examined more for the ways in which it brought Hitler into the public eye than for its distinctly 'Sorelian' content.

Had Weber chosen to examine the young Hitler using Sternhell's frame of reference – admittedly something almost no scholars of German fascism have done – his revelations about Hitler's seemingly surprising political choices, right up until the age of 30, would not have to be described in terms of plasticity, pliability, suggestibility, or even opportunism. Instead, he could have made a case that Hitler was himself only part of a broader milieu of young, disaffected men who – like Mussolini in Italy – sought violent societal upheaval as a hygienic measure, viewed the Great War as part of that process, and emerged from the war committed to a transformation of leftist rebellion into rightist rebellion by way of replacing 'class' with 'nation' as the object of veneration. While none of this was in Weber's remit, had he chosen to take this approach, he would have made a slightly less sensationalistic claim that an apolitical Hitler only came relatively late in the day to his most infamous ideological beliefs, and more of a deeply sustainable claim about the ways in which German fascism rather closely resembled its counterparts in Italy and elsewhere. This would have made Hitler into the 'Bavarian Mussolini' in an even more substantial and perhaps historiographically more long-lasting fashion.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

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## Response

Thomas Weber

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In *Becoming Hitler: The Making of a Nazi*, I tried to shed new light on how an awkward loner with still fluctuating political ideas turned into the man we all know, at a moment in which a financial, economic, political, and social crisis destroyed the fabrics of democracy and liberalism. I attempted, to the best of my ability, to resolve many of the enigmas surrounding Hitler's metamorphosis and the collapse of early-twentieth-century globalism. I thus greatly appreciate the lengths to which Harold Marcuse, Mark Roseman, and Richard Steigmann-Gall went to respond to my ideas, to test and challenge them, at times teasing out their real significance and developing my ideas further and at other times encouraging all of us to rethink the ideas expressed in *Becoming Hitler* once more. Above all, I am most grateful for the generosity of their comments, even when they disagree with my interpretations.

In summarizing and explaining my book, Harold Marcuse explains perfectly what I was trying to achieve in *Becoming Hitler*, what my approach was, and what my arguments and their significance are. In fact, he extends some of my ideas in ways I find inspiring. I am intrigued, for instance, by his comparison between Jan Gross' explanation about the behavior of some of the villagers of Jedwabne and Hitler's radical reversal. The same is true of several observations made by Roseman and Steigmann-Gall, such as Roseman's remark that 'a kind of psychological ratchet effect [might have been at work during Hitler's metamorphosis], whereby the performance of authenticity led for Hitler to a feeling of true authenticity.'

I find it difficult to find a statement in Marcuse's review essay with which I do not agree. Even when he criticizes my book, he is, I believe, right. There is only one claim in Marcuse's review that I hope is not quite true. 'What Weber fails to explain,' Marcuse writes, 'is what triggered the unheralded outburst of full-blown antisemitism in that key September 1919 letter [to Adolf Gemlich].' In *Becoming Hitler*, I tried to explain how and why Hitler became an ideologue and an antisemitic convert in the summer of 1919, and how his earnest attempt to understand the nature of things in order to build a Germany that would be sustainable for all times led to an uncompromising all-or-nothing antisemitism. Whether or not I achieved what I was trying to do is, of course, not for me to judge.

Nevertheless, I fully agree with Marcuse that we should not allow Hitler's personal life to be dismissed 'as subsidiary or irrelevant' if we want to understand the emergence of Hitler's genocidal antisemitism. As Marcuse writes, 'I do think there is a relevant piece missing to come to a fuller understanding of Hitler's drive toward genocide: Hitler's



personal life.' Elaborating on this statement, he adds, 'As convincing as Weber's meticulous and nuanced contextual reconstruction of Hitler's antisemitism after it emerged full-blown in the summer of 1919 is, I think some earlier piece of the puzzle is missing. It may not explain how the Shoah came about, but it would shed light on how the so-called butterfly effect can end up spawning a hurricane of hatred.'

I tried to make the same point in *Becoming Hitler*, but for fear of advancing an unsubstantiated argument, I clearly was too timid and understated in the manner in which I raised the issue. In fact, I was under the impression of having written a book that details Hitler's personal life in the belief that we can only make sense of Hitler's political development if we are taking his personal life seriously.

I believe that there are good reasons to believe that in the year prior to Hitler's arrival in Munich, something might have happened in his personal life that was deeply traumatic for him and that would have a butterfly effect. As I do not have firm evidence as to what this traumatic might have been, I only alluded to the fact that something very significant happened to Hitler in 1912 or 1913 in my discussion of his interaction with Helene Hanfstaengl. I was trying to reopen the idea that there really is a missing year in Hitler's life, challenging the attempt in most recent Hitler biographies to dismiss this. In doing so, I hoped that readers of my book with knowledge of previously unreported or underreported facts relating to Hitler's whereabouts in 1912 and 1913 might come forward. Clearly I did myself a disservice by not being more explicit about what I was trying to achieve. Due to the importance of the matter in explaining the subsequent emergence of Hitler's antisemitism, it is worth quoting the section in question from my book:

In 1971 [Helene Hanfstaengl] observed, 'He was really very cagy about saying what he really did [in Vienna].' Helene believed that something personal must have happened to Hitler in Vienna, for which he blamed the Jews, which he could not, or did not want to talk about: 'He built it up – this hatred. I often heard him raving about Jews – absolutely personal, not just a political thing.'

Helene Hanfstaengl may well have been right. It was not just that he did not want to talk to anyone about his Vienna years, but also he kept misdating his move to Munich. All evidence suggests that Hitler did not arrive in Munich before 1913. Yet in an article for the *Völkischer Beobachter* of April 12, 1922, he claimed to have moved from Vienna to Munich in 1912. He made the same claim during his trial following the failed coup of 1923.

Hitler did not simply make the same mistake twice, as, in a brief biographical sketch he had included in a letter he wrote to Emil Gansser, the party's chief fund-raiser abroad, in 1921, he made the identical claim. And he would do so again in 1925 to Austrian authorities when requesting to be released from Austrian citizenship. It has never conclusively been resolved why Hitler deliberately predated his arrival in Munich by a year.<sup>1</sup>

I should add that a few years ago, I was confidentially asked to assess a number of documents in private hands that purport to shed light on how Hitler's missing year is linked to the subsequent emergence of his antisemitism in 1919. I initially dismissed those documents as being almost certainly fabrications. In the meantime, however, I have come across fragments of evidence – all of which are unreliable when inspected in isolation from each other – that suggest that I might have been too fast in categorically concluding that the documents shown to me were nothing more than fabrications.

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Weber, *Becoming Hitler: The Making of a Nazi* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), p. 258.

As I do believe that we are unlikely to be able to understand Hitler's antisemitic conversion without looking at the prewar and the wartime Hitler, I fully appreciate Mark Roseman's comment that 'the emergence of the antisemitic Hitler comes so quickly that it seems at least plausible that it was long part of his intellectual baggage but now came to the forefront.' One might add that Hitler would, of course, have been aware of the antisemitic language and sentiments that had been an integral part of the European and North American tradition. I am not quite sure, though, if describing antisemitic baggage as coming 'to the forefront' quite explains Hitler's metamorphosis. 'Coming to the forefront' would suggest that Hitler had already subscribed for years to the kind of antisemitism that he would propagate from the second half of 1919. As Hitler's post-1919 antisemitism was of the all-or-nothing kind that sought to explain all – or almost all – of the ills of the world, it is difficult to see how Hitler, deep in his heart, would have already subscribed to the kind of Jew-hatred that can move easily back and forth between the background and the forefront. Simply put, an all-or-nothing antisemitism seeking to make sense of all the problems in the world would surely have found its prior expression for somebody as politically interested as Hitler had been for years.

It is, of course, likely that Hitler always had been infused at least with the kind of mild forms of negative cultural stereotypes about Jews that were harbored by almost everybody in Europe at the time. Yet precisely because those sentiments were shared by almost everyone in Europe and North America, they will not get us very far in explaining the sudden emergence of the kind of antisemitism that Hitler started to preach in the late summer of 1919. In my mind, it is far more likely that prior to 1919, Hitler had been familiar with radical world-explaining antisemitism without subscribing to it. After his politicization and radicalization in the summer of 1919, the familiarity with this kind of antisemitism is likely to have provided Hitler with a powerful tool to explain all the problems of his day, much along the lines of how David Nirenberg's *Antijudaism: The Western Tradition* explains the persistence of Jew hatred over the last 2,500 years.

Hitler's antisemitic conversion might thus well have been a result of a fatal interplay of a Nirenberg-style phenomenon; personal trauma; an all-or-nothing personality and sectarian mindset; a sincere attempt to understand the nature of things; and, finally, a belief that only an uncompromising elimination of all sources of Germany's internal and external weakness would allow the country to live in a rapidly changing world.

Nevertheless, I agree with Roseman that I should have considered the potentially antisemitic animus of Hitler's 1915 letter in which he rejects Germany's 'inner internationalism.' Unlike most scholars, I do not merely see an anti-left-wing animus at work in the letter, instead arguing that Hitler's opposition to internationalism was broadly defined and was likely to have been opposed 'to international capitalism, international socialism (i.e. to Socialists who, unlike Social Democrats, did not stand by the nation during the war and who dreamed of a stateless, nationless future), to international Catholicism, and to dynastic multiethnic empires.'<sup>2</sup> Roseman is right that I should have been more explicit in considering the potentially antisemitic nature of the letter as well.

Furthermore, Roseman is absolutely correct in stating that 'it is certainly not necessarily the case that Hitler had Jews in mind ... though by then it would have been unusual for people worried about internationalist influence within the country not also to be

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. xvii.

worried about Jews.' I also agree with Roseman that it is 'possibly significant that he doesn't mention them [i.e. Jews]' in the letter. I see this as evidence of an evolution of political views on Hitler's part that were not necessarily driven in the first instance by anti-semitism, but of views that made possible the kind of radical antisemitic conversion that Hitler underwent in 1919.

I also appreciate Roseman's observation that 'the book's weakest elements are in fact the efforts to "test" the clarity of his intent [with regard to his antisemitism].' In writing *Becoming Hitler*, I underwent a transformation from a dyed-in-the-wool functionalist to what one may call a neo-intentionalist (or to use Roseman's term, a 'latter-day intentionalist'). I still believe that fixity and fluidity, along with functionalist and intentionalist modes of behavior, coexisted in Hitler. Yet I now see the existence in Hitler's mind of a preferred 'final solution' that was genocidal from as early as early 1920s: a preference without which we cannot understand what happened in the 1930s and the 1940s, and one that makes the long path from postwar Munich to Auschwitz less twisted than often believed.

In fact, in the German edition of *Becoming Hitler*, which is based on a translation of the first full draft of my book, I still advance an argument about Hitler's antisemitism that focuses on its metaphorical character. As a result, I do not put much emphasis on Ully Wille's letter in *Wie Adolf Hitler zum Nazi wurde*. However, while researching and writing the first draft of my book, doubts about my own interpretation had started to brew. Subsequently, it was as a result of a series of long conversations with the historian Nicole Jordan as well as stumbling across a new key source that I finally changed my mind on the nature of Hitler's antisemitism.

While Roseman is absolutely right in pointing out that there is a danger of reading too much into Wille's letter, I would stress that that letter is the weakest link in a chain of pieces of evidence that I present. Wille's letter only becomes significant when examined in conjunction with these other pieces of evidence. In order to test my proposition that Hitler had arrived at a preferred 'final solution' that was genocidal by the early 1920s, we will have to look at: 1) evidence from the early 1920s, 2) Hitler's modes of behavior in the 1930s and early 1940s, and 3) all the evidence that is available (and will become available) on orders given by Hitler between 1940 and 1942. By the time *Becoming Hitler* went to press, I was already aware of two pieces of evidence from the early 1920s pointing toward a preferred 'final solution' that was genocidal. Since then, I have become aware of two additional pieces of evidence that I see as 'smoking guns' that genocide was on Hitler's mind as early as the early 1920s. Whether or not readers agree with my reading of the evidence presented in *Becoming Hitler*, at the very least I do hope that we can agree on the need to take a fresh look at several pieces of evidence. These are sources that have either not been available until now or that have been dismissed as insignificant as a result of a teleological search for evidence in support of functionalist interpretations of the Holocaust.

I am both intrigued and puzzled by Richard Steigmann-Gall's review of my book: intrigued, as he raises and expands incisively upon many of the same questions that I examined in my two books on Hitler, yet puzzled that he does not see both of our questions as similar in content. I am also puzzled that he labels my argument that Hitler was not radicalized until after World War I as a 'provocative revisionist' claim.

In claiming that Hitler was not politicized and radicalized until after the end of World War I, I am well in line with most of the recent scholarship on Hitler. Indeed, this has become the new orthodoxy. In a temporal sense, I would have had to claim the opposite

of what I did to advance anything bordering on provocative and revisionist. If the arguments of my book are provocative, they are so only in their explanation of how, why, and with what consequences – rather than when – Hitler's political metamorphosis took place. It is here that my two books on Hitler take inspiration from Zeev Sternhell's work.

Like Sternhell, I treat fascism – or in this case Hitler's emerging brand of National Socialism – as a more or less coherent ideology. More importantly, I look at the left-wing origins of both National Socialism and Hitler. In fact, *Hitler's First War* lists (and uses) three of Sternhell's books in its bibliography. *Becoming Hitler*, meanwhile, while not explicitly mentioning Sternhell, pays tribute to Israel's greatest scholar of fascism on its very first page: 'National Socialism was the offspring of two great nineteenth-century political ideas,' I write, before detailing how fascism is a synthesis of nationalism and socialism.

Steigmann-Gall is, of course, absolutely right in suggesting that I might have pushed things even further than I did in my two books on Hitler. And he intriguingly posits that my book would have benefitted from a more explicit comparison with Benito Mussolini. 'Is it possible,' Steigmann-Gall asks, 'that Hitler's political development was in fact more like Mussolini's than we realize?' What he really means here is that I should have focused more on the Sorelian end of the story of Sternhell's argument, rather than stressing how Hitler oscillated between left-wing and right-wing forms of collectivism (and how these two forms of collectivism overlapped). In other words, I am asked to entertain the possibility that Hitler, just as Mussolini, had already been infused with a worshiping of direct action and violent revolutionary societal upheavals prior to World War I.

This is a great question, yet in my opinion, a comparison of the pre-1914 Hitler with the prewar Mussolini brings two very different men to the fore. The son of an admirer of anarchist thought, Mussolini had always been a man of restless action, preaching and engaging in violence, and serving time in prison. Hitler, meanwhile, had kept his head down, neither publishing his ideas nor engaging in direct political action. The son of a customs official, Hitler was a diligent follower of orders until the end of World War I. There is nothing in Hitler's prewar utterances or his wartime letters that revealed a love or worshipping of violent revolutionary upheaval and of direct action.

While I applaud Steigmann-Gall's suggestion that I may want to go even further than I have hitherto done in taking inspiration from Sternhell's work and in taking the 'socialism' in 'National Socialism' seriously, I believe that a Sorelian approach to making sense of Hitler, in fact, confirms – rather than challenges – my core arguments from *Becoming Hitler*. Sternhell's work helps us understand how fascism and certain strands of left-wing collectivism overlapped and were related to each other. In that sense, there is nothing particularly surprising in the fact that Mussolini, Hitler, and even Sorel oscillated between different left-wing and right-wing ideas at crucial moments of their life. Yet this is not the same as saying that only people with a preexisting love for direct action and violence would move back and forth between these kind of ideas. Hitler would, of course, ultimately come to celebrate '*die Tat*' and '*Kampf*' in his speeches and writings. Unlike Mussolini, however, Hitler never had been a man of action prior to World War I, which is why I believe that the story of how Hitler became Hitler is fundamentally different from that of the making of Benito Mussolini.