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The Political without the Personal

review of Thomas Weber's *Becoming Hitler* (2017)
by Harold Marcuse, University of California

What is there new to say about Hitler? The U.S. Library of Congress subject heading for Hitler's biography lists 10-20,000 unique titles, depending on language and other filters. Since Ian Kershaw's mammoth 1,600 page biography was published in 1998, massive biographies by Volker Ullrich (2009) and Peter Longerich (2015) 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 *Hitler's First War* (2010), which drew on hitherto unused records of Hitler's regiment and documents of its members to answer definitively open questions and debunk longstanding misconceptions about Hitler's wartime service. One of its important results was the proof that Hitler had given no indication that he harbored any ill feelings towards Jews during those years.

Among more than a dozen other recent scholarly works about Hitler worthy of mention, I single out Othmar Plöckinger's 2013 monograph about, as its subtitle puts it, Hitler's crucial years in the German military, 1918-1920. In many ways Plöckinger builds on and extends Weber's World War I analysis into the postwar period. In the footnotes of the book at hand we see Weber's dialog with Plöckinger and other recent biographers, discussing and correcting misinterpretations. As just one example, Weber debunks Hitler's widely accepted claim in *Mein Kampf* that he and 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 (p. 14 with 347 n. 29). This example is especially instructive because it illustrates Weber's approach and the contribution this book makes to our understanding of how drifter Hitler came to be the ideologue and dictator Hitler. 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.

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 from Hitler's late November 1918 return from the Pasewalk military hospital via Berlin to Munich until his re-return from Traunstein by February 12, 1919, Hitler was basically attempting to stay in the army at all costs, even as it turned further leftward under post-Kaiser Social Democratic and then Jewish-Communist leadership. In this and the second chapter 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, that he should become a politician, is pure fiction. Reconstructing Hitler's whereabouts and activities week by week during this period, based for example on local newspaper reports, and "gray" as well as published local memory literature in the Traunstein city museum and archive, lead 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 a doubt that Hitler was very comfortable in the Social Democratic milieu of revolutionary Munich up to and including 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 Vertrauensmann (delegate, literally 'person of trust') of his military unit to the Munich government. Among his responsibilities was to pick up weekly propaganda briefings and announce 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 buddy Schmidt decided to do. Five days before his thirtieth 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 in early May. Having just escaped arrest by the "Reds" on April 27 (Weber's analysis of previous interpretations of this incident in a footnote is again noteworthy, see p. 53f and 353 n. 25), Hitler and his barracks-mates were rounded up by the counterrevolutionary "Whites" on May 1. In the volatile situation after 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. He was so successful in this job that he was selected first to take, then to offer lectures designed to steer former soldiers away from communist leanings and towards 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 German troops occupied the town. It was the collaborators with the previous Soviet occupiers, Gross found, who 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 ideas of others but evolving over time as Hitler sought solutions to what Weber repeatedly stresses was his core goal: How to ensure 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 seminal event for Hitler at that time: the announcement of the terms of the Versailles Treaty on May 7. Although not particularly harsh in comparison with 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 was 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 (68). 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" in part II. 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 plural New Testaments is a play on words, denoting both foundational gospels as in the Christian bible (Hitler indeed compared himself to Jesus, 286), 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 "first antisemitic letter," composed at the behest of Hitler's army handler Karl Mayr, to answer a citizen's inquiry about how the Bavarian Social Democratic government stood 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 (123). Further, Weber lays out evidence that Hitler's antisemitism at this time was, in contrast to mainstream Bavarian antisemitism, primarily anti-capitalist, but not anti-Bolshevik. What Weber fails to explain, which is a major shortcoming of this book, is what triggered the unheralded outburst of full-blown antisemitism in that key September 1919 letter.

Before returning to this question, Weber walks his readers through Hitler's discovery of a "New Home" in the nascent German Worker's Party (DAP), to the resolution of "Two [divergent] Visions" of the party as an secretive, elite right-wing vanguard, vs. a mass, populist movement. Needless to say, the latter vision won out. Explicating the well-known February 1920 official program of the newly retitled "National Socialist" DAP and Hitler's speeches of this time, Weber

notes that neither that party nor Hitler's answer to the national security question were yet anti-Bolshevik, nor interested in imperial-expansionist Lebensraum.

Chapter 7, "A 2,500-Year-Old-Tool," then zeros in on the nature of Hitler's antisemitism and its implications. Beginning with a fake-bearded Hitler flying to Berlin on March 16, 1920, in an open plane with his ideological mentor Dietrich Eckart, at the behest of his army mentor and patron Karl Mayr, vomiting for 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 August 13, 1920 before over 2,000 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 was literal, seeing Jews as racial-biological carriers of societal infection who would have to be physically excised from society. The other was metaphorical, seeing Jewishness as an orientation or set of capitalist, anti-communitarian values, which might be held by practitioners of the Jewish faith, but might 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 actually to envision complete eradication of all literal (racial) Jews. It is worth quoting a key illustrative passage at length (178):

It is ultimately impossible to know whether Hitler understood his own racial, biologized, all-or-nothing anti-Semitism 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.

This, in a nutshell, is the overarching theme of Weber's *Becoming Hitler*. Weighing source against source he shows time and again how Hitler modified his verbal stances according to circumstance, and he then applies Hitler's actions, as well as they can be reconstructed, to interpolate what his actual position at that 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 in Hitler's longtime bodyguard and chauffeur Emil Maurice, whose close if not intimate relationship with Hitler broke off in 1927 over Maurice's romance with Hitler's half-niece Geli Raubal. It later turned out that Maurice, SS member no. 2, had a Jewish great-grandfather, for which 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 a request for a personal audience. Along with the special protection Hitler 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 actual 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 US as Germany's primary foes, and that an alliance with a 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. Weber lays out in various Hitler texts how the demagogue's antisemitism now added an anti-Bolshevik dimension as well (Jews being the string-pullers of Bolshevism), and that his understanding of world politics shifted from macroeconomic to geopolitical power.

This brings Weber to the final part of his book, continuing the biblical New Testament allusion with the title "Messiah." While this title adequately captures the overarching argument, Weber slogs through the details of the NSDAP's struggles to keep itself relevant and financially afloat. 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 was he 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" (238). 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). Bolstering his opportunism thesis, Weber shows how Hitler toned down his anti-Americanism when 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 un- 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 Munich's Institute for Contemporary History conducted in 1964 with Hitler's companion since their common service in Mayr's army propaganda unit, Hermann Esser. By 1920 Esser was editor of the Nazi newspaper, participated in the 1923 Putsch, and 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 of 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 him as "a man with an emerging deep understanding of how political processes, systems, and the public sphere worked" (288). I can't repress remarking 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 "drummer" to manipulate politicians of national repute such as Ludendorff into believing 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 Ludendorff's close associate Hans Tröbst's recently published but contemporary papers and memoir to narrate the political calculations behind of 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 during those years. 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 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* (321). While it is clear that Weber did not have time to work through the mammoth 2016 critical edition of *Mein Kampf* 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. One 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 (278, 332). Weber takes this as evidence that Hitler and Hess had considered that idea at that time. The second is a passage in a recently published (2007) 1923 interview with Catalanian journalist Eugeni Xammar. In response to Xammar's question whether Hitler, who told him he rejected a localized pogrom as ineffective because other Jews would still dominate politics, wanted to kill all Jews throughout Germany at once, Hitler elaborated (332):

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.

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 half before Hitler would see that not only pogroms, but also mass murder were indeed practicable. Hitler's brazen admission belies Weber's own claim in the quotation above 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 genocide was on the Munich rabble-rouser's mind at least as early as 1922-23.

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 (334f). 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.

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 to come to 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 (13, 67, 325). 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 butterfly effect can end up spawning a hurricane of hatred.