




Hitler

A.N. Wilson

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A ruthless dictator who saved his country from economic ruin only to nearly destroy it—and an entire people—in his quest for world domination, Adolf Hitler forever changed the course of history. In this masterful account of Hitler's life, biographer A.N. Wilson pulls back the curtain to reveal the man behind the mythic figure, shedding new light on Hitler's personality, his desires, and his complex relationship with the German people. While Hitler maintained that his life had been characterized by "struggle" from its very beginnings, Wilson shows that the reality could not have been more different. Hitler grew up in middle-class comfort and, as a young man, lacked ambitions of any sort besides a vaguely bohemian desire to become an artist. And while the Hitlerian mythos holds that he forged his skills as a leader during the First World War, Wilson explains the truth: Hitler spent most of the war as an office boy miles from the front lines, and only received his cherished Iron Cross because of his slavishness to the officers he served. The army gave him a sense of purpose and brotherhood, however, which continued to inspire Hitler once the war ended.

Hitler left the army with no skills, contacts, or money—and yet, within fourteen years, he would become chancellor of the German nation. Wilson describes the story of Hitler's ascent as one of both opportunism and sheer political shrewdness. He possessed no real understanding of the workings of government but had a prodigious knack for public speaking, and found that a large number of Germans, despairing at their country's recent defeat and terrified by the specter of international communism, were willing to listen to the right-wing fantasies that had taken root inside his head. Allying himself with the extremist German Workers' Party (soon renamed the National Socialist Party), Hitler offered many Germans a seductive vision of how the country might raise itself back up and reclaim its rightful place at the center of world politics.

Wilson shows that, although Hitler's bid for power stalled at first, he soon gained traction with a German public starved for hope. Using his skills as a manipulator, Hitler found himself first at the head of the Nazi Party, then at the helm of the German nation. Wilson explores the forces that allowed Hitler to become Chancellor of Germany, and later to march Germany into total war. He examines Hitler's increasingly virulent anti-Semitism and his decision to implement the Final Solution to exterminate European Jews, and he considers Hitler's tactical successes—and failures—in World War II. Wilson also reveals a great deal about how Hitler's personal life affected his time as Germany's leader, from the lasting pain caused by the death of his mother and the suicide of his young niece to his poor health and addiction to the drugs prescribed by his doctor. As Wilson demonstrates, Hitler the Führer was not so different from Hitler the bohemian: lazy, moody, and hypersensitive, he ruled more through intimidation and the mystifying force of his personality than through any managerial skill or informed decision-making. His story—and that of Germany—is ultimately a cautionary tale. In a modern era enamored with progress, rationality, and modernity, it is often the darkest and most chaotic elements of society that prove the most seductive.

Hitler's unlikely rise to power and his uncanny ability to manipulate his fellow man resulted in the deaths of millions of Europeans and a horrific world war, yet despite his colossal role in world history, he remains mythologized and, as a result, misunderstood. In *Hitler*, A.N. Wilson limns this mysterious figure with great verve and acuity, showing that it was Hitler's frightening normalcy—not some otherworldly evilness—that makes him so truly terrifying.

Hitler Details

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Whitley says

Initially, this book does not cover new ground, but Wilson's insights as always are fresh and thoughtful. The last chapter is quite amazing and particularly trenchant. The equal of his excellent books on Paul and Jesus. Wilson's historical writing is outstanding.

Sam Quixote says

The life of the most reviled man in history is always a tricky subject. Not the perspective (which is universally one of the utmost horror) but the manner of its telling. I think because AN Wilson has written "A Short Biography" of Adolf Hitler, that most will look upon this modest, and yes short, 190-page book as inconsequential as such a study of this person must require far more pages to be worth the reading. After all, how to compress the man who arguably shaped the modern world into its current incarnation, into such a relatively short book compared to say, Ian Kershaw's "Hubris" and "Nemesis" books totalling 2100 pages?

Wilson does this by covering the facts in a swift, concise fashion without too much detail or extensive background minutiae than is absolutely necessary. He doesn't miss out anything important but nor does he go into enormous detail which isn't to say that you come away with an incomplete idea of the man but that this book presents an informative biography of Hitler that will appeal to the non-academic and casual student of history for whom someone like Kershaw is intimidating to pick up.

What's interesting about this biography is that Wilson has a biased opinion of Hitler; like all of us he is disgusted with the Nazi regime and Hitler as a person, but unlike other biographers who adopt a neutral, just-the-facts-stance, Wilson frequently editorialises upon the events of Hitler's life as they unfold. He berates the young Hitler for his foolishness and laziness in squandering his family's money in pursuing a fruitless art career and not attempting any form of work. Thereafter, Wilson criticises every instance of Hitler's personality and actions, unapologetic to call Hitler and his cronies any number of names, but also grudgingly conceding that Hitler possessed extraordinary oratory skill and an erratic but charming personality that seduced many who came into his presence.

It's this approach of Wilson's, coupled with the brevity of the book, that I think have caused many people to look upon this book unfavourably and yet I feel these are two of the book's assets. That, and a few facts that I hadn't known about Hitler previously such as how the Olympic Torch tradition originated with the Nazis in the 1936 Berlin Games, and Wilson underlining a very important fact about Hitler: that many of his qualities which we detest today were shared by our ancestors. His hatred of Jews and blacks were views that British, American and French governments also held. His modernity: he was an atheist who believed in science, rationality, and (a somewhat crude and warped) Darwinism, the rejection of religion, vegetarianism, and embracing technology, are generally qualities we look upon today as necessary to modern, forward-thinking people.

"Hitler: A Short Biography" is not an academic book in that it doesn't go into the kind of detail an academic would insist upon, but nor does it try to be that kind of book. It is a populist book aimed at general readers with an interest in history, providing access to one of the most infamous people in human history. And in that, Wilson succeeds strongly, creating a well-written, concise and interesting overview of Hitler.

Ben Hartman says

Very basic. This is too short of a book to give much detail into Hitler's life. Most of what was written I had already read elsewhere. If someone knew nothing about Hitler at all, this might be a good place to start, but I would not recommend for someone who already has a working knowledge of WWII and its surrounding events.

Stephen West says

I enjoyed reading this brief (about 200 pages) biography of Hitler. The author did a great job of bringing Hitler's personal characteristics to life. However, I was hoping to the author would do a bit more towards explaining Hitler's rise to power. Instead, while he does a good job of describing events, all too often, he falls back on the old saws of Hitler's supposed charisma and the power vacuum in Germany during the 30s. as to his charisma, he doesn't even explain how someone he describes as lazy, seen as lacking in leadership qualities by his superiors and Associates, boorish, uninformed and suffering from meteorism (look it up) could be considered charismatic, even as a speaker.

Bob Mobley says

A.N. Wilson has written a compelling, thoughtful and revealing "portrait" of a man whose name is always associated as the "Demon King of history." This is an illuminating short biography of Adolph Hitler. It is a powerful study in leadership. I found one of the most compelling and fascinating points in Wilson's superb examination of both the man and his career, Wilson's observation that Hitler's success in becoming Chancellor of Germany in such a short period of time following his imprisonment for a failed attempt to take over the German Government in his Putsch of 1923, was based on Hitler's intuitive grasp and understanding of the power of radio, film and spectacles. Wilson shows how Hitler had an intuition, which amounted to genius, around the power of the spoken word, and that "it" was going to be more significant than the written word during the 20th century. Wilson presents Hitler as a man ahead of his time, who forshadowed Hollywood and TV stars, and post-WWII politicians. This is a compelling study that may have great relevancy for today and what is going on in our "global world."

Paul Kerr says

After having read some fairly hefty books in the past on WW2, it was refreshing to find a quick and easy read on what is obviously such a complex topic as Hitler. Despite being able to read this in one or two sittings, I did find several insights and new levels of thinking that kept me interested - that Hitler's lies stretched back to his youth was unsurprising, but the contradictions in his writings and speeches when compared to his lack of personal drive was very interesting. A short and sharp study recommended for an easier read when you are between some Kershaw and Hastings

Hank Pharis says

A good introductory, overview of Hitler's life. His transformation from a homeless person to almost the dictator of all Europe is still amazing. He not only wanted to eliminate the Jews but to make virtual slaves of all Europeans. Along the way Wilson also dispels some of the common myths about Hitler.

Eleanor Levine says

A delightfully well-written book. It's also short. If you want a quick history, with appropriate cynical statements about Der Fuhrer, this is the one to read. AN Wilson is not afraid to be honest and literary and thought provoking. Nice research and though I knew much of the history, Wilson's presentation is immensely entertaining.

David Szatkowski says

This is a worthy book for those who do not know the period or Hitler particularly well, an introduction of a biography said many reviewers. I found that to be true. That said, it was a good introduction for me, and illuminated some of the people around Hitler in ways that I did not particularly know. Wilson does make the important point - Hitler was very much a common man of the post -Enlightenment, as are we all. Which raises the question, have we learned as much from the horrors of the past as we think?

Jacob Stelling says

A good insight into Hitler's life.

Dozy Pilchard says

Bearing in mind this is a very short biography with no grand designs, it is actually quite good. Wilson builds a vivid picture of Hitler, his personality and his internal hang ups. I would recommend this short book as a starting point for further exploration into the life of this abomination.

Kritch says

A brief biography into Hitler's life. A lot of details are skipped and a lot of stuff are just written without sources, so I'm not really sure how accurate it is. But, I got it from some bargain bag, so no complain. In my opinion, a good book who wants to know about Hitler but has very little time, like me. So many things I knew were wrong, I'm almost feel like an idiot.

Chris Walker says

A thought-provoking little book (only 200 pages) which details Hitler's childhood and rise to power and

shows us where Hitler was quite ordinary and where extraordinary. And where barking mad. The author surmises that another Hitler is quite possible. So beware the non-smoking, vegetarian who is good at oratory, prepared to blame a racial group and loves uniforms, Frederick the Great, Napoleon, Wagner and German shepherds apparently.

Caroline says

This book was just what I was looking for. A brief introduction to one of the world most notorious megalomaniacs. It gave an interesting overview of Hitler's background, his rise to power, and the situation in Germany which made him the man of the moment, and encouraged his career to blossom. The war was discussed in terms of Germany's triumphs and failures. Many people round the world saw it as "Hitler's War", and given his determination to personally direct the army, this was not inappropriate.

A. N. Wilson is an excellent writer. What could have been a bare-boned textbook was fleshed out with lots of characterization, concerning both Hitler and his cronies, and the nature of the Nazi party. He also pauses several times to ask "what if"; to question whether the huge catastrophe that was the Second World War could have been avoided if one or two things had been different. For such a short book I found it surprisingly thoughtful.

He also discusses the history of anti-Semitism before and during the war, which is always shocking. I also learnt quite a lot. Besides the notorious incidents, he describes small issues too. For instance there was toothache in Germany during the war, as most of the German dentists had been Jewish. I also learnt the degree to which other countries were impervious to the plight of the Jews. (And that in turn made me question how much that still happens today, with other people under severe duress).

This book has received several negative reviews, but I thought as a basic introduction to Hitler it was very good.

Julian says

This is a good option if you want to go beyond Wikipedia, but at the same time don't want to face a book the size of a toaster. The book gives you a solid idea of what type of character Hitler was and walks you through the different parts of his life and deeds. There's some analysis about the war itself, e.g. the impact antisemitism had in the effort, Hitler's motivations and the overall state of the world at that time. It is interesting to see how Hitler, in the words of the author, was both an ordinary and extraordinary man. This seems to be a common theme in the Nazi party. I believe Himmler and Goebbels were similar in that sense.

I think some of the facts might not be accurate, like Hitler being in photo before WWI or snubbing Jesse Owens at the 1936 Olympics, but I think the overall information is good.

There are some weird bits, about gay marriage, political correctness and even dogs. I was scratching my head when reading and thought they were funny, in a laughing at the author kind of way. That had nothing do with anything.

Good book. I picked it up at the library, but I wouldn't mind owning it.

