



The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation

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This widely-used text on the Nazi regime explores the complex issues historians face when they interpret the Third Reich. Kershaw expertly synthesizes data and evaluates complex historiography looking at the major themes and debates among scholars about Nazism. Drawing on the findings of a wide range of research, particularly the work of German scholars which has not been widely available in English editions, he uncovers interpretational problems, outlines the approaches taken by various historians, and provides clear evaluations of their positions.

This edition reflects current concerns and fresh research and contains substantial revisions to the chapter on "Hitler and the Jews" and an updated survey of recent historical work including Goldhagen's controversial book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*.

The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation Details

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Filip Rajakovic says

A brilliant work, I have to warn many avid Nazi-period historical buffs, that this work focus on the historiography of the rise of Nazism and its brutal reign of terror. The historiographical debates and various school of thoughts regarding many topics, especially the very interesting and very controversial Intentionalists vs Functionalists are simply explained to novice readers.

Phillip Tigue says

This is a historiography, not a history. This book is for those interested in the developments in the historical arguments centered on the Third Reich. Kershaw presents all sides of the current (and past) arguments, and presents a final analysis.

For serious historians and not for light readings. No fluff here.

Peter Jana says

The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives is an exemplary historiography. Evans synthesizes numerous different perspectives on the main topics of debate and includes his own. A lot has been written since 2000, so I hope that a new edition will eventually be released.

I've outlined selected chapters below:

Chapter 2: The Essence of Nazism

I. Is Nazism a form of fascism or an example of totalitarianism?

A.Totalitarinsim: Nazism and Stalinism are fundamentally the same. See page 36 for criticism.

1.Carl Friedrich's 6 points (24):

- a.An official ideology
- b.Single mass party
- c.Terrorisitic police control
- d.Monopoly over the media
- e.Monopoly of arms
- f.Central control of the economy

2.Hannah Arendt

3.Karl Dietrich Bracher

B.Fascism: Nazism is politically unique, should not be confused with Stalinism. Right wing dictatorships are fundamentally different from left wing. See page 41 for list of critiques.

1.First proposed by the Comintern in the 1920s. Based on Lenin, fascism is a necessary and final stage of bourgeois capitalist rule (27).

2.August Thalheimer and Otto Bauer – Bonapartism
Capitalists control the economy. Fascists control the government. The Fascist government became the instrument of the bourgeoisie. Tensions develop between the two that can only be resolved through war (29).

3. Nazism as Hitlerism. Nazism is unique because Hitler was unique.

II. Is Nazism unique or an expression of European trends? (pp. 21-22)

A.View 1: Sonderweg thesis (“special path”): Nazism is a unique development in the modern capitalist west. Conditions particular to Germany brought it about.

1.Pre-modern forces (pre-industrial, feudal traditions) co-existed with modern forces to create unique conditions. The strength of pre-modern forces fundamentally prevailed and led to the Third Reich.

B.View 2: The opposite view emphasizes the bourgeois character of Germany. Germany was essentially a modern capitalist country, like most of Europe. The Third Reich was a consequence of a crisis of capitalism that was particular to Germany.

C.View 3: Nazism was unique (Sonderweg) that grew out of authoritarian Prussian traditions, but fundamentally owed its uniqueness to the ideology and personality of Hitler.

Chapter Three: Politics and the Nazi State

I.Was Nazi Germany the product of the character of German capitalism? Did it follow the political aims of German industry (47)?

A. According to Kershaw, before the seizure of power the Nazis

were seen by many industrialists as their last hope rather than their first choice. They did not like the Weimar republic even before the Nazis were on the scene, but they were willing to support Nazis as a party that can bring political order and safeguard capitalism.

II. To what extent were Nazi decisions made with economic decisions in mind (48)?

A. Tim Mason: "The primacy of politics." From 1936 onwards the Nazi government acted independently of economic considerations, and in some cases, contrary to them (49).

a. Evidence: industrialists and their representatives were left out of the decision making process, the state directed industrial production.

b. Other who don't pay much credence to economic interpretations include Karl Dietrich Bracher and Ernst Nolte.

B. Alfred Sohn-Rethel: Nazi power derived from its ability to protect German capitalism during a time of crisis. This was accomplished by turning away from an international market economy towards one directed by the interests of the state. Industrialists were "in the same boat" as the Nazis and could not get out, even if they wanted to.

C. Even most Marxists agree that the Nazi state had relative autonomy from the economy (55).

Chapter Four: Hitler: "Master" in the Third Reich or "Weak Dictator?"

I. The Third Reich was directed by Hitler (Intentionalist perspective).

A. "Programmatist Interpretation" Hitler had a programme which stayed consistent from the early 20s to 45. Another view sees Hitler as central, but claims he was more of an opportunist and manipulator than visionary with a set program (72).

B. Karl Dietrich Bracher: Nazism is "Hitlerism"

i. Hitler was uniquely German. A radical expression of German Nationalism.

ii. The chaotic government structure was deliberately developed by Hitler to increase his own power.

C. Structuralist interpretation

a. Martin Broszat, *The Hitler State*. The chaotic nature of the German government was a result of Hitler's weak leadership.

b. The overall structure of government consisted of constantly shifting power bases and warring factions. Instead of developing policies, Hitler sanctions what's already been proposed (75-76).

c. Mommsen – similar to Broszat. Contra Hildebrand. Hitler's ideological statements were propaganda, not firm statements of intent.

i. Hitler did not provide clear planning or direction.

ii. The dictatorship was an expression of preexisting ideas and impulses. Hitler was a driving force, but he did not create them. Furthermore, in certain matters like church and state policy, he did not always propose the most radical solution (77).

s. Hitler relied on personal loyalties which has led some scholars to label the Third Reich, a neo-feudal empire. These personal loyalties found their way into the structure of government and eventually became destructive of rational government (83).

E. Tim Mason: The timing of war was not a matter of Hitler's planning, but was a product of economic necessity. War was a safety-valve to keep workers employed and happy. The regime was not willing to impose short term reductions or lower the standard of living (88).

a. Others argue that the war was a result of an arms race.

F. According to Kershaw, we need to look at the tension between both perspectives as a dialectical push and pull between intention and structure (p.90)

Chapter Five: Hitler and the Holocaust

Hitler's role in the Holocaust is an example of the intentionalist / structuralist debate applied to a specific case.

I. Intentionalist/Programatists: Lucy Dawidowicz and Gerald Fleming (p.97)

A. Both follow the programatist interpretation. Hitler has a vision of genocide from early in his political career and planned from

final solution from the beginning. See Mein Kampf (1925). The orders for each stage in the Holocaust came from Hitler.

B.Gerlacht

II.Structuralists:

A.Hans Mommsen (98).

1.The Holocaust should be understood as the result of the chaotic and fragmented decision making process of the Third Reich.

2.There was no “Führer Order” that commenced mass genocide. Hitler’s followers took his propagandistic rhetoric and did things on their own (99).

3.The Kommissarbefehl orders from the Spring of 1941 relate to ordered shootings of political comisars in the Soviet army on the eastern front and should not be confused with systematic slaughter of all European Jews (117).

B.Martin Broszat (99).

1.In the Fall of ’41, deportation was still the plan. The mass killings started because of local initiatives (local military / SS leadership). Large numbers of Jews were in relocated to the east and their was no place to put them because the invasion of the USSR failed (see pp. 128-148).

2.The Wannsee Conference conveyed to provide clarification of the deportation policy of Jews to the east. Was not the orchestration of a preconceived plan. It ushered in the final stage of the escalation policy

C.Evaluation: Hitler was a necessary but insufficient cause of the Final Solution

1.Important distinction: Intention does not create cause. Because Hitler “intended” to do it, does not mean that he could, or that he could direct the particulars of how it happened.

•Two Issues: Hitler’s intention. Hitlers ability. One should not presuppose the other.

2.Pre War Jewish Policy:

i.Mostly a matter of Hitler responding to pressure from below.

ii. Boycott of Jewish businesses in 1933 result of pressure from SA radicals.

3. Radicalization of violence 33-35 had negative economic consequences and was generally disruptive to society. The Nuremberg laws emerged as a result of the need for guidance, and to put pressure on Jews in a more "orderly" fashion.

4. Crystal Night was the result of lack of coordination as radical elements within the SA-SS security apparatus tried to gain control of Jewish policy.

The consensus view: The Holocaust did not start from a single decision or directive. It developed piecemeal as a response to circumstances (deportation policy, failure to invade the USSR) as they developed. Hitler's role was to set the tone and legitimize decisions after they were made.

Dimitri says

Ian Kershaw's introduction to the historiography of the Third Reich deserves merit for its insightful inclusion of (West-) German scholarship, but unfortunately the new information incorporated into the newer editions is meagre, with the bulk of the text limited to the 1980s. This book ages more rapidly than it should. To end on a positive note : for non-scholars, even the older conclusions will challenge their popular assumptions.

Hollis says

If you want a book that unravels all the complexities and key areas of debate in the study of Nazi Germany, this is the best. My only problem is that many of the reviewers on the back of the book seem to think that it would make a great introduction to the subject and I cannot agree with that assessment. If you are reading out of general interest and don't know very much about twentieth-century German history, you will find this hard-going.

AC says

The traditional view of Hitler and the Reich was that Hitler dominated all aspects of Nazi policy, and that the entire drive to world domination and genocide was driven by his ideological fanaticism, all of which was set out in frightening detail long before the seizure of power (1933) in *Mein Kampf* (1925), that turgid and rambling ideological autobiography.... This interpretation has been dubbed by modern scholars (with their usual love of trivializing labels) as the "intentionalist" or "monocratic" position - and is what most of us have been exposed to. But beginning with the work of Martin Broszat, Hans Mommsen, and others -- a new view gained popularity: Hitler was hardly a powerful dictator (they claim), but a weak center around which

swirled a powerfully dynamic leadership fragmented into small power-cartels, like neo-feudal lords...; that Nazi Germany was actually a "polycracy". Further, in nearly every area -- economy, administration, domestic matters, foreign policy, and in anti-Jewish legislation and, ultimately, even in the establishment of the "Final Solution" (Endlösung; so, e.g., the works of Christopher Browning) -- German policy (and the Nazi Leadership) simply stumbled forward with no set plan, improvising ad hoc solutions to problems that arose. Before 1942 Spring, e.g., all they wanted to do was "deport" the Jews -- and the rational organization of killing arose from local initiatives put in place by local lords in Poland who were simply swamped (poor guys...) by all the recent "deports" and who, ever efficient and ambitious (i.e., less ideological) devised the only possible solution to their problem. This is now the consensus view of the Holocaust. This general approach to the problem of Nazi Germany is called the "structuralist" position.

Kershaw -- Sir Ian -- who's two volume biography has earned him great honors (there is now a one-volume abridgment available (2008)) -- is (though usually quite sensible and never extreme; Mommsen was, by contrast) a 'Structuralist'. This book sets out the scholarly debate in various spheres, shows how the various positions were developed (and by whom), and then defends the structuralist position. Kershaw is steeped in the German literature and is authoritative.

This book is therefore very important, and of great utility to students of the topic -- even if one can barely endure his approach. A.J.P. Taylor, the great British historian (and reactionary) once said that there was nothing wrong with Hitler in foreign policy, except for the fact that he was a German. Niall Ferguson, who gets so much press these days, wrote his principal academic book (The Pity of War) blaming Britain (not Germany) for WWI. Kershaw is not so bad as these two. He even voted for Tony Blair, apparently.... Still, reading this book required some strength of character on my part.

Worse -- it is poorly written -- the proof-reading is flawed -- there are anacoloutha everywhere.... Often I had the feeling, while reading, that either I or Sir Ian was dyslexic.... and of course I assumed it must have been me... (till I would re-read the offending sentences....).

Very peculiar...

Bosworth's book on Italy (below) does not have these vices -- though Bosworth has a more mediocre mind than does Kershaw -- and it is his (Kershaw's) undoubted brilliance, ultimately, that makes this book informative and worth the read.

(The complementary volume on the Italian side is:
<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/57...>)

Ana says

Brilliant!

Lobstergirl says

Three stars because this is the second edition, published in 1989, and there's been much intervening scholarship. (Also Germany has been reunited, obviating the need to speak of West German historians vs.

East German historians.) This is a dense (though not terribly long) work of Third Reich historiography, not history, so I wouldn't recommend it to a casual history reader unless they really want to know about the *Historikerstreit*, for example. Kershaw examines some of the ways historians look at the Third Reich: is it a form of fascism, a brand of totalitarianism, or a unique phenomenon? (That's one chapter heading.) Was Hitler the master of the Third Reich, or a weak dictator? (That's another.) Was Nazi foreign policy fully intentional, or more hapless? Ought we to look at the Holocaust as something situated in history, or something so awful that historiography can't properly explain it and we need to resort to moral terminology? All of these things historians of the Third Reich have had to grapple with, and still do more than two decades after the book's publication.

I intend to take up many of Kershaw's suggestions for further reading. Even though they're 24 years old.

Josh Liller says

Let me sum up this book in a sentence:

"If the redundant echoes of 'atomized mass society' theories can be dispensed with, then it may indeed be at the social rather than the institutional level that, if not the full-blown, politically loaded concept of totalitarianism, then the more modest notion of the 'total claim' of a regime on its subjects could prove heuristically useful in a comparative analysis of behavioral patterns - acclamatory and oppositional - in quite differently structured societies and political systems."

That's a quote from this book and typical fare. This book has some good info, but to get to it you have to wade through a sea of horrifically verbose prose and dull theory.

I've heard good things about Ian Kershaw and this book has a high rating, but if he writes like this all the time I'm not going to touch his books with a ten-foot pole.

I'm not even going to finishing reading; it's that utterly unpleasant.

L. C. Nielsen says

Kershaw's classic initially presents an extensive introduction to the immense historiographical problems, stemming from both documentational issues in the Third Reich and the immense challenge of "rationally" explaining Nazism and its crimes. In its pages, a powerful synthesis on various perspectives on Nazi rule is given, showing how for example the Holocaust is best understood as arising both from the vague, competitive hierarchies of Nazi Germany, and the influence of Nazi ideology. It also examines how Hitler, in spite of his frequently erratic or even aloof style of ruling and unwillingness to draft especially domestic policy, nevertheless exerted an immense direct influence over the actions of the state. In spite of essentially merging several views, the book is extremely informative and most clear stands on important questions are either taken or rejected. It is an incredibly educational, well-referenced, scholarly yet tersely written work that demonstrates not only the importance of understanding every aspect of a society in order to explain its collective actions, but also the inherent difficulties in applying any historical method even to a relatively recent and well-documented period.

Marc says

Very interesting collection of articles on quite diverse aspects of nazism. A prelude to his great Hitler-biography.

Pier Olivier Parent says

Un incontournable pour quiconque s'intéresse au nazisme.

BC says

This book is amazing. Anyone intimidated by the vast literature on the Nazi period can take away the knowledge and interpretation of entire bookshelves by reading this one book. Kershaw's understanding and analysis are amazing, although his conclusions when dealing with historiographical disputes tend to be a little too 'middle of the road'. Still, you come away from this book having read over a hundred books, and with a vastly better understanding both of the Nazi regime and of the historiography surrounding it as well.
