HITLER

VOLKER ULLRICH

A BIOGRAPHY

VOLUME I. ASCENT

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About the Book

Despite his status as the most despised political figure in history, there have only been four serious biographies of Hitler since the 1930s. Even more surprisingly, his biographers have been more interested in his rise to power and his methods of leadership than in Hitler the person: some have even declared that the Führer had no private life.

Yet to render Hitler as a political animal with no personality to speak of, as a man of limited intelligence and poor social skills, fails to explain the spell that he cast not only on those close to him but on the German people as a whole. In the first volume of this monumental biography, Volker Ullrich sets out to correct our perception of the Führer. While charting in detail Hitler's life from his childhood to the eve of the Second World War against the politics of the times, Ullrich unveils the man behind the public persona: his charming and repulsive traits, his talents and weaknesses, his deep-seated insecurities and murderous passions.

Drawing on a wealth of previously neglected or unavailable sources, this magisterial study provides the most rounded portrait of Hitler to date. Ullrich renders the Führer not as a psychopath but as a master of seduction and guile — and it is perhaps the complexity of his character that explains his enigmatic grip on the German people more convincingly than the clichéd image of the monster.

This definitive biography will forever change the way we look at the man who took the world into the abyss.

About the Author

Volker Ullrich is a historian and journalist whose previous books include biographies of Bismarck and Napoleon, as well as a major study of Imperial Germany, *The Nervous Superpower 1871—1918*. From 1990 to 2009, Ullrich was the editor of the 'Political Book' review section of the influential weekly newspaper, *Die Zeit*. On publication in Germany in 2013, *Hitler: Ascent 1889—1939* became a top ten bestseller.

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Hitler

Ascent 1889–1939

VOLKER ULLRICH

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY

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THE BODLEY HEAD
LONDON

Introduction

‘The fellow is a catastrophe, but that’s no reason not to find him interesting as a personality and destiny’, wrote Thomas Mann in his essay ‘Brother Hitler’, adding that no one should feel ‘above dealing with this murky figure’.[1]

As the Third Reich recedes ever further into the past, one might think that interest in the most malevolent person in twentieth-century history would diminish. The exact opposite has been the case. Both in Germany and without, the public’s fascination with Hitler comes in recurrent waves, and the obsession with the Führer seems only to have increased in the new millennium. ‘There’s never been so much Hitler’, wrote the historian Norbert Frei in 2005, sixty years after the end of the Second World War and the demise of the Third Reich.[2] Indeed, on the occasion of that anniversary, unprecedented media attention was paid to the Führer and his cohorts. Hitler was everywhere – in the cinema and on television, on the covers of magazines and in the pages of popular history books. There is no reason to believe the situation will be any different at any future anniversary.

The global entertainment industry has long since appropriated and transformed Hitler into a sensationalist, pop-cultural icon of horror, guaranteed to send the maximum shivers down audiences’ spines. The leader of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party, or NSDAP, and the man who so dominated the course of world events from 1933 to 1945 remains – to cite journalist Jens Jessen – the

‘hardest of all drugs for generating attention’.[3] Hitler stirs up more emotions than any other historical figure, including Stalin. That is, of course, due to the scale of the crimes that Germans committed under his leadership.

Parallel to but largely independent of the entertainment market, academic historians around the world have pressed forward with investigations concerning nearly every aspect of Hitler and National Socialism. No historical topic has been more thoroughly researched in all its nooks and crannies – today the literature on the subject fills whole libraries. And yet academic interest in this ‘murky figure’ never wanes. The riddles surrounding Hitler – the questions of how and why he could come to power and hang on to it for more than a decade – demand ever-new explanations. There has been no shortage of biographical approaches to these questions, but only four have stood the test of time: Konrad Heiden’s two-volume *Hitler: A Biography*, written in the mid-1930s from Swiss exile; Alan Bullock’s canonical *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* from the early 1950s; Joachim Fest’s sweeping portrait *Hitler: A Biography*, first published in 1973; and Ian Kershaw’s standard-setting *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris* and *Hitler 1936–1945: Nemesis* from 1998 and 2000.[4]

Heiden’s biography represents an attempt to ‘identify the historical significance of the phenomenon of Hitler at the height of his power’.[5] As the Munich correspondent for the liberal *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper between 1923 and 1930, Heiden witnessed Hitler’s rise to national prominence first-hand. The book is based both on the author’s own observations and on information from sources close to Hitler in his days as a political agitator, and Heiden resisted the twin temptations of mythologising or ridiculing its subject. ‘The “hero” of this book’, Heiden wrote in his preface, dated 1935, ‘is neither a superman nor a puppet. He is a very interesting contemporary and, viewed quantitatively, a man who has stirred up the masses more than anyone else in

human history.'[6] Later research has corrected a number of biographical details Heiden got wrong. Nonetheless, his work is full of convincing conclusions and clever analyses, for instance concerning Hitler's skill as an orator and his uncanny 'dual nature'.[7]

This first Hitler biography was enthusiastically received by German exiles. 'Constantly with Konrad Heiden's scorching Hitler biography', noted Thea Sternheim, the ex-wife of playwright Carl Sternheim, in late October 1935. 'A spotlight upon Germany. Suddenly, you thank God for the existence of this sort of human conscience. Might not this book be the first decisive breach in the infernal crime that is taking place right now in Germany?'[8] The art patron and diplomat Harry Kessler, who like Sternheim lived in French exile, was also full of praise. 'A clever and convincing book', he wrote in his journal. '"A failed man and a failed people have joined forces." How accurate.'[9] The Gestapo and the Security Service tried to track down Heiden, who had moved to France, but when the Wehrmacht invaded that country in 1940, he was able to flee via Lisbon to the United States.[10]

Alan Bullock's thrilling 1952 debut, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, has been the starting point for all subsequent academic study of the 'Hitler phenomenon'. The British historian had advance access to confiscated German documents which had been used as evidence at the Nuremberg Trials and which were about to be made public.[11] Bullock depicted the German dictator as a completely unprincipled opportunist driven solely by lust for power at its most raw and pure.[12] In his conclusion, Bullock cited the former Danzig (Gdansk) Senate President Hermann Rauschning, a German exile whose 1938 book *The Revolution of Nihilism* had greatly influenced views of Hitler at the time. In it, Rauschning asserted that National Socialism was 'the very essence of a movement, pure dynamism, a revolution with various slogans that it was

always willing to change'. One thing, according to Rauschning, that National Socialism was *not* was 'a world view and a doctrine'.[13]

The thesis that Hitler was basically a power-hungry political opportunist came in for some heavy historical revision in the following decades. Above all, historian Eberhard Jäckel convincingly demonstrated in the late 1960s that Hitler did indeed maintain a consistent world view, no matter how extreme and insane, and that this perspective guided his actions. Jäckel argued that the two most important elements of Hitler's world view were the 'removal of the Jews' and the conquest of 'living space in the east'. Ever since the 1920s, Jäckel showed, Hitler held true to these two axiomatic, fixed ideas with rigorous consistency.[14] Both Fest and Kershaw adopted this insight, and the present book will reaffirm it as well.

Joachim Fest's Hitler biography, coming more than twenty years after Bullock's, is impressive for its style – Jäckel gushed that 'No one since Thomas Mann has written about Hitler in such good German prose'[15] – while historian Karl-Dietrich Bracher praised 'the author's talent for dense and sweeping interpretation'.[16] Somewhat sheepishly, many academic historians asked why the journalist Fest, and not one of their own, had been able to achieve this.[17]

Fest not only came up with an unprecedented psychological portrait of Hitler's personality, he also located the Führer firmly in the context of his epoch. Fest identified the most important phenomenon in Hitler's rise as the convergence of individual and general factors, 'the difficult-to-decipher correspondence between the man and the times and the times and the man'.[18] To illustrate what he meant, Fest interspersed his chronological narrative with 'intermediary reflections' that brought together individual biographical details and collective historical developments. The result was the paradoxical conclusion that Hitler, who

despised revolution, was ‘the German form of revolution’, idiosyncratically combining both modern and reactionary elements.[19]

Fest’s interpretation, based on already-published sources rather than original archive research, has attracted criticism. Some scholars have rightly pointed out that Fest dramatically downplays the role of the conservative elites who ushered Hitler through the doors of power.[20] And it is impossible to overlook the educated, bourgeois contempt for the half-ignorant *arriviste* that Fest displays on several occasions, for instance, in his snide critique of Hitler’s poor writing in *Mein Kampf*.[21] Fest’s assessment of Hitler is also heavily influenced by the Führer’s favourite architect and Nazi armaments minister, Albert Speer. As a journalist, Fest had helped Speer write his 1969 memoirs; in return Speer provided information for Fest’s Hitler biography. As a result, Fest’s account guilelessly passes on a number of legends, for instance the idea that Speer was an apolitical specialist who fell under the helpless sway of the dictator.[22]

Yet despite all these objections, Fest landed a real coup. In one review, historian Klaus Hildebrand predicted that Fest’s pioneering work would represent ‘the definitive book on Adolf Hitler for quite some time’.[23] That held true for twenty-five years until another British historian, Ian Kershaw, took up the challenge of a major Hitler biography. Kershaw had access to sources not available to Fest, most significantly the diaries of Joseph Goebbels from his years as Gauleiter of Berlin and then propaganda minister.[24]

In his introduction, Kershaw confessed that, to an extent, he approached Hitler from the ‘wrong’ direction – from the structures of Nazi rule, which had been the subject of his earlier research. In contrast to Fest, Kershaw was less interested in the ‘strange’ character of the man than in the social conditions and forces that had made Hitler possible. ‘The task of the biographer . . .’, Kershaw wrote, is ‘to focus

not upon the personality of Hitler, but squarely and directly upon *the character of his power – the power of the Führer*.' To explain the sinister force of this power, Kershaw argued, it was necessary to focus more on the expectations and motivations of German society than on Hitler himself.[25] He was aiming for nothing less than a biography that embedded Hitler in a social and political context.[26]

Kershaw tried to show that in many situations Hitler didn't need to do very much at all since German society – everyone from the underlings surrounding him to ordinary people on the street – were increasingly inclined to anticipate and fulfil the Führer's every wish, 'working towards him'.[27] Critics accused Kershaw of supporting an image of Hitler that made the dictator look 'interchangeable, superfluous or at most weak'.[28] In fact, Kershaw did not minimise the historical role played by Hitler and his insane, ideological fixations, but he did illustrate that without the readiness of many people to work for the man in charge, there would have been no way he could have achieved his murderous aims. Kershaw's main thesis was that the dynamism of the Nazi regime arose from the interplay of Hitler's intentions with activism emanating from subordinate individuals and institutions. The results were ever more radical 'solutions'. With this explanation, Kershaw ended the long-standing, fruitless debate between 'intentionalist' and 'structuralist' schools of German historiography.[29]

'Our libraries contain 120,000 studies of Hitler – Kershaw's is their Central Massif', concluded Frank Schirrmacher, publisher of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, in his rave review of Kershaw's work.[30] So after such a monumental Hitler biography, is there really a need for another one? More than fifteen years have passed since Kershaw's first volume appeared in 1998. Since then the wheels of

historical research have continued to turn – at an ever-faster pace. Recent works on Hitler himself encompass everything from the Führer's relationship to Munich and Berlin and an analysis of his physiognomy to wild speculations about his alleged homosexuality. There has also been a tremendous amount published on surrounding figures, from Goebbels and Eva Braun all the way to Nazi sculptor Arno Breker and Hitler's personal physician Karl Brand. In addition, a host of scholars have written monographs on topics ranging from the economy and the German Foreign Ministry under Nazism to consumerism and corruption in the Third Reich. Last but not least, recent years have seen the editing and publication of Hitler's complete notes and speeches up until 1933, the official Reich Chancellery documents under Hitler's reign, and Goebbels's complete diaries. All of this material first appeared after Kershaw had finished his work.[31]

Bringing it all together and synthesising it would be justification enough for a new Hitler biography, but that is not all I intend to do. On the contrary, my aim is to refocus attention on Hitler, who necessarily had to remain a bit anaemic in Kershaw's account, without neglecting the social factors that propelled his meteoric rise. Along the way, I hope to put to the test several assumptions that recur throughout the literature on Hitler. One of them is that the Führer was basically an ordinary person with limited intellectual horizons and severely restricted social skills. As Karl-Dietrich Bracher once formulated it, the basic problem with approaching Hitler is to explain 'how such a narrow-minded, unpleasant fellow could found and carry a movement of such immense dimensions and consequences'.[32] Kershaw rephrased the question as: 'How do we explain how someone with so few intellectual gifts and social attributes . . . could nevertheless have such an

immense historical impact, could make the entire world hold its breath?'[33]

But what if those premises are wrong? What if Hitler's horizons and intellectual abilities were not so crassly underdeveloped? Kershaw, like most of the Hitler biographers before him, sees the Führer's sole talent as his ability to excite the base instincts of the masses.[34] Hitler was undoubtedly an extraordinarily gifted speaker, and that capability was of inestimable importance to his rise to power during the 1920s and '30s. But the chairman of the NSDAP was not just an excellent demagogue. He was also a fairly gifted actor who had mastered the art of appearing in a variety of masks and roles. Perhaps no one realised this better than Charlie Chaplin in his 1940 film *The Great Dictator*. When Albert Speer saw it in 1972, he praised the comedian for 'having penetrated Hitler's character a lot further than any other contemporary person'.[35]

Joachim Fest wrote of Hitler leading 'a strange existence characterised by roles' – this will be one leitmotif for my depiction of the Führer.[36] The artistry with which Hitler was able to conceal his real intentions from both friends and foes was another main key to his success as a politician. Seventeen years after the fall of the Third Reich, in his memoirs the former Finance Minister Lutz Schwerin von Krosigk identified 'bottomless mendacity' as Hitler's primary personal characteristic. 'He wasn't even honest towards his most intimate confidants', Krosigk recalled. 'In my opinion, he was so thoroughly untruthful that he could no longer recognise the difference between lies and truth.'[37] Krosigk's moral condemnation reveals that Hitler – the consummate role player who had repeatedly got the better of his conservative allies – continued to fool them even after his death.

Hitler liked to present himself as a frustrated artist who had been driven involuntarily into politics, and the myth of

the ‘artist-politician’ has influenced many biographies. This obscures the fact that Hitler was a well-below-average painter and architect, however: his great gift was for politics alone. In his ability to instantaneously analyse and exploit situations, he was far superior not only to his rivals within the NSDAP but also to the politicians from Germany’s mainstream parties. There is no other way to explain why he emerged victorious in all of the crises within the Nazi Party leading up to 1933. Or how he was able, within a few months after his appointment as chancellor, to subjugate his conservative coalition partners in the ‘cabinet of national concentration’, although they were convinced that they had co-opted him for their ends. This astonishing process will be discussed in detail in the chapter entitled ‘Totalitarian Revolution’. Furthermore, I will try to show that Hitler’s unusually improvisational and personal style of leadership, which created constant responsibility conflicts and an anarchic tangle of offices and portfolios, was anything but an expression of political incompetence. On the contrary, it served to make Hitler’s own supremacy essentially unassailable.

Another cliché holds that Hitler’s personal life outside politics was completely irrelevant – indeed, that the Führer didn’t have a genuine private life. Even his first biographer Heiden wrote that Hitler was a demagogue who could only connect with people en masse and lacked the ‘courage’ to have a private life.[38] Bullock characterised him as an uprooted individual without a home or a family, while Fest described ‘a human void around [Hitler]’, simply dismissing the idea of his having personal relationships.[39] Kershaw expanded on this thesis, arguing that Hitler was entirely consumed by his role as Führer. ‘Hitler’s private life was his life as a political creature. If you take away the political, little to nothing remains’, the historian told the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* when the first volume of his biography

appeared. ‘In a sense, he was an empty shell.’[40] Not surprisingly the leading exponent of structuralist German history, Hans Mommsen, also favoured this interpretation, writing that there was actually no private sphere whatsoever behind Hitler’s public appearances – a striking example of how the mythology surrounding the Führer has influenced the writing of history.[41]

This book will attempt to correct that picture and show that the putative void in Hitler’s non-political existence is a myth. In a sense, previous biographers have fallen for the role Hitler played best, the one that concealed his private life and cast him as someone who had renounced all personal relations to devote himself to ‘*Volk* and Reich’. The chapters concerning Hitler’s relationships with women and the circles he entertained at his country house in Austria will show how little the cliché of the impersonal Führer corresponds to reality. Hitler’s private life was in fact far more varied than many of his contemporaries and later historians imagined. It is untrue that he was fundamentally incapable of having personal relationships. Characteristically, however, he made no clear distinction between political and private spheres: for him the two were unusually intertwined. This realisation sheds new light on Hitler’s specific style of rule.

‘Are we permitted to depict Hitler as a human being?’ the German media asked in 2004 with the release of Bernd Eichinger’s film *Downfall*, which depicted the Führer, played by veteran actor Bruno Ganz, during his final days in the bunker in Berlin.[42] The only answer is: not only are we permitted, we are *obliged* to. It is a huge mistake to assume that a criminal on the millennial scale of Hitler must have been a monster. Naturally it would be simpler to reduce him to a psychopath who used political action to realise his homicidal impulses. For a long time this tendency to

demonise Hitler dominated historical research and prevented us from having a clear view of the actual man. In February 1947, from the isolation of his cell in Spandau prison, Albert Speer remarked on the growing tendency in post-Nazi German society 'to depict Hitler as a carpet-chewing hotheaded dictator who blew his stack on the slightest of occasions'. Speer thought that was both wrong and dangerous, noting: 'If there are no human characteristics in the picture of Hitler, if one ignores his power of persuasion, his winning qualities and the Austrian charm he was capable of displaying, one will never do justice to him as a phenomenon.'[43] In the mid-1970s, after reading his memoirs, the film-maker Leni Riefenstahl wrote to Speer that, for her, the question remained:

> What was it about Hitler that allowed him to impress and indeed bewitch not just the German people, but many foreigners as well? . . . I can never forget or forgive the terrible things that happened in Hitler's name, nor do I want to. But I also don't want to forget what a massive effect he had on people. That would be to make things too easy for us. These two seeming contradictions within his personality – this schizophrenia – were likely what produced the enormous energy within his person.[44]

Such references to Hitler's unique dual nature, the conjunction of winning characteristics and criminal energy, should not be dismissed as mere attempts by Speer or Riefenstahl to distract attention from their own culpability. On the contrary, we must take such statements seriously if we want to understand the seductive force Hitler possessed not just for his own entourage, but for large segments of the German population. In the chapter with the somewhat unsettling title 'Hitler as Human Being', I have tried to use just this approach to go beyond what Fest called examining

an ‘un-person’ and gain insights into Hitler’s habits and characteristics.[45] It is the key chapter of this biography, the connecting point between the period from Hitler’s birth to 30 January 1933 and the time from early 1933 to Hitler’s fiftieth birthday on 20 April 1939.

Hitler was without doubt the focal point of the Nazi regime, and the Third Reich lived and died with him. For that reason, anyone who wants to understand both the monstrous and attractive sides of National Socialism must also examine both Hitler as a motivating force and the forces that motivated him. That will be the subject of the chapter entitled ‘Cult and Community’, which will seek to illuminate the reciprocal relationship between the dictator and German society and the reasons for Hitler’s enormous popularity.

To depict Hitler in human terms is not to elicit sympathy for him or to downplay his crimes. This biography seeks to show the sort of person he was since the 1920s: a fanatic Jew-hater, who could tactically conceal his anti-Semitism but who never lost sight of his aim of ‘removing’ Jews from German society. For that reason, I will pay special attention to the question of how Hitler, once in power, tried to realise this goal and what sort of support he received. A separate chapter will also examine Hitler’s leading role in the battle against the Christian churches – a subject hardly mentioned by either Kershaw or the earlier biographers.

Sections devoted to German foreign policy after 1933 will illustrate how doggedly Hitler pursued the goal, which he had also maintained since the mid-1920s, of conquering ‘living space in the east’. This remained true even when he appeared publicly in the guise of a man of peace who was only striving for a revision of the Treaty of Versailles. The subsequent chapter, entitled ‘The Way to War’, will then describe how the dictator gradually turned from the politics of revision to the politics of expansion. Hitler was not only a

motor in this process. He was also swept along by a development directly encouraging large-scale military conflict. The start of the Second World War in late summer 1939 will mark the beginning of this biography's second volume.

The present volume is concerned with the 'years of ascent', but by no means do I want to give the impression that Hitler enjoyed an uninterrupted success story. On the contrary, I will show that his career was permanently threatening to come undone – most significantly after his failed putsch in 1923 and the Nazis' disastrous electoral defeat in November 1932. Hitler's path to power was anything but inevitable: in January 1933, it would have been eminently possible to prevent his nomination as Reich chancellor. The chairman of the NSDAP profited from a unique constellation of crises that he was able to exploit cleverly and unscrupulously. He also benefited from his domestic adversaries' tendency, from the very inception of his political career, to underestimate his abilities. A similar lack of appreciation for Hitler's gifts later convinced foreign statesmen that they could control his aggression. That was an illusion, from which the world first awoke when Hitler crassly violated the Munich Agreement in March 1939. With that, the dictator had crossed the line. Nemesis was at hand – although none of Hitler's contemporaries, and certainly not the man himself, realised how close it was.

This book does not pretend to offer a fully new interpretation of history. In light of the achievements of my predecessors from Heiden to Kershaw, that would be utterly arrogant. But I do hope that the first volume of this biography succeeds in bettering our understanding of the man Stefan Zweig described as 'bringing greater disaster upon the world than anyone in our times'.[46] In particular, I hope that Hitler's personality emerges more clearly in all its astonishing contradictions and contrasts so that our picture

of the man is more complex and nuanced. Hitler was not a 'man without qualities'.[47] He was a figure with a great many qualities and masks. If we look behind the public persona which Hitler created for himself and which was bolstered by his loyal followers, we can see a human being with winning and revolting characteristics, undeniable talents and obviously deep-seated psychological complexes, huge destructive energy and a homicidal bent. My aim is to deconstruct the myth of Hitler, the 'fascination with monstrosity' that has so greatly influenced historical literature and public discussion of the Führer after 1945.[48] In a sense, Hitler will be 'normalised' – although this will not make him seem more 'normal'. If anything, he will emerge as even more horrific.

Writing about the pivotal figure in German and European history is without doubt the most difficult task for a historian and demands the greatest responsibility. There will always be aspects of Hitler we cannot explain. German publisher Rudolf Augstein was probably right in his review of Fest's work when he questioned whether there could ever be *the* definitive biography of Hitler.[49] People will never stop pondering this mysterious, calamitous figure. Every generation must come to terms with Hitler. 'We Germans were liberated from Hitler, but we'll never shake him off', Eberhard Jäckel concluded in a lecture in 1979, adding: 'Hitler will always be with us, with those who survived, those who came afterwards and even those yet to be born. He is present – not as a living figure, but as an eternal cautionary monument to what human beings are capable of.'[50]

1

The Young Hitler

‘I have no idea when it comes to my family history’, Hitler remarked in August 1942 in one of his countless monologues at his Wolfsschanze headquarters. ‘I’m the most limited person in the world in this area. I am a fully non-familial being, someone who by his very nature isn’t focused on relationships. It’s not in me. I belong to my ethnic community.’[1] The German dictator had good reason to declare his lack of interest in family history. Several obscure bits of his family story had already begun to occasion rumours and speculation when Hitler began his political career in the early 1920s. They have made historians rack their brains ever since, and even today not all of the questions surrounding Hitler’s origins have been cleared up.

Hitler’s family biography takes us to Waldviertel, an agricultural region of northern Austria that borders on Bohemia in what is now the Czech Republic. On 17 June 1837, in a village called Strones, an unmarried daughter of a small farmer, named Marie Anna Schicklgruber, gave birth to a son she named Alois. Children born out of wedlock were nothing unusual – that sort of thing happened all the time in the countryside. But at the age of almost 42, the mother was extraordinarily old for the times. Nonetheless, five years later she married the 50-year-old miller’s assistant,