



## *Becoming Hitler: The Making of a Nazi* by Thomas Weber.

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In *Becoming Hitler*, historian Thomas Weber (Univ. of Aberdeen) builds on his previous study of the early career of Adolf Hitler.<sup>1</sup> Here he focuses on the period roughly from the 1918 Armistice to the publication of *Mein Kampf* in 1925. Like all scholars of early Nazism, Weber must contend with the incomplete record of Hitler's early life, removing the layers of myth he himself propagated about his early life, while using a fragmentary set of records to plot his political and intellectual development. This study complements those of scholars like Ian Kershaw<sup>2</sup> and Brigitte Hamann.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, Weber argues that Hitler was neither a rank opportunist nor an inscrutable cipher, but a driven pragmatic politician whose ideological commitments developed, evolved, and solidified in postwar Bavaria.

Part I, "Genesis," examines Hitler's clear involvement—despite his later disavowals—in the revolutionary governments of Bavaria in the first half of 1919; throughout the turmoil, Hitler remained employed but uncommitted ideologically to the socialist and communist regimes, surviving until his eventual demobilization. This "drifter and opportunist" held onto his spot in the army and became a propagandist for the military; part of his work included a propaganda course which included themes anticipating some of his later obsessions: a rejection of Bolshevism, focus on food security, and predilection for populist politics. Hitler was no empty vessel: he "picked and chose large chunks of the ideas expressed by the speakers, when and if he felt they helped him to find his own answers to Germany's defeat and on how to set up a state unreceptive to external and internal shocks" (93).

Part II, "New Testaments," traces Hitler's path from modestly successful publicist to leader of the Nazi Party. His later accounts of his formative period, Weber notes, were suspect: for example, the introduction of the Nazi platform in 1920 did not win the broad acclaim Hitler later claimed. And audiences at many early Nazi meetings came to hear better known speakers than Hitler. Intellectually, this was the period when Hitler's interest turned toward Eastern Europe under the influence of Alfred Rosenberg and Dietrich Eckart, though his racism was not particularly anti-Slavic. The author also presents snippets of Hitler's private life, including his strained relations with most of his family (chap. 8).

Part III, "Messiah," follows Hitler's rise and seeming fall with the failed Munich ("Beer Hall") Putsch of 1923. Styled by some as a "Bavarian Mussolini," Hitler nonetheless overcame intra-Party conflicts and quarrels with local *völkisch* leaders and even the Bavarian government, which considered expelling the Austrian citizen. Weber traces Hitler's eclectic intellectual interests: he read race theorists who did not always accord with his later ideas, while rejecting occultism. He often skimmed books, seeking confirmation or expansions of his existing ideas. Hitler's belief in his own

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1. *Hitler's First War: Adolf Hitler, the Men of the List Regiment, and the First World War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2010).

2. *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris* (NY: Norton, 1998).

3. *Hitler's Vienna: A Dictator's Apprenticeship* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1999).

destiny continued to grow, though he carefully portrayed himself as the “drummer” or architect of a movement, while giving precedence to such prominent conservative leaders as Erich Ludendorff. The failure of the poorly planned Munich Putsch led to Hitler’s conviction for treason and confinement in Landsberg Prison; he served nine months of his five-year sentence. There he thrived intellectually, using the time to write *Mein Kampf*. Many of his later ideas crystallized, including his preoccupation with *Lebensraum*, a concept borrowed from Hans Guenther. Hitler emerged from jail certain of his vision of himself and fully confident in his conception of Germany’s destiny.

One of the major themes of the book is slightly counterintuitive: that Hitler’s rise was possible only in the context of postwar Bavaria. Yet, Weber argues, had he remained in Bavaria, he would likely have flamed out. It was necessary for him to expand the scope of his ambitions to the whole of Germany. Weber also boldly contends that Hitler’s radical anti-Semitism began to take shape only in 1919. Weber is careful, cagey even, arguing that it is difficult to discern how deeply Hitler’s anti-Semitism ran even as he began to deploy it increasingly as a way to distinguish Nazism in the crowded rightwing landscape of Bavaria. Other elements—for example, the intertwining of anti-Semitism and anti-Bolshevism—were layered in over time.

Weber’s key conclusion concerns the long-term aim of Hitler’s anti-Semitism; he argues that Hitler “makes it perfectly clear that his preference by 1923 was for genocide, but that, if an outright genocide was not possible, he would be pragmatic and go for the second best-option: mass expulsion” (333). Scholars of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust will take note, as this assertion goes to the heart of understanding the longer term trajectory of Nazi anti-Semitism and the unfolding of the Holocaust.

*Becoming Hitler* demonstrates that, over seventy years (and 120,00 volumes) later, our view of Adolf Hitler’s early, ill-documented intellectual and political development continues to be refined. Thomas Weber has persuasively shown that a good grasp of that development is vital to understanding Nazi foreign policy and, above all, the unfolding of anti-Semitic policies in the 1930s and early 1940s.