

Hitler Reading

Is there much to be learned from a portion of his books?

BY MICHAEL McDONALD



Hitler at Berchtesgaden, 1936

“Hitler is explicable in principle,” the historian Yehuda Bauer has said, “but that does not mean that he has been explained.” Nor, one is tempted to add, as the stack of books devoted to figuring him out grows ever higher, does it necessarily mean that he ever will be. How is it possible that a man so contemptuous of civilized values could rise to rule over one of Europe’s most civilized nations? What enabled him to retain the support of the German people as he openly pursued his plans for war and genocide? Was he an actor, or a true believer? A typical tyrant (but one with modern means of control and destruction at his disposal) or a *sui generis* singularity?

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In *Explaining Hitler* (1998), Ron Rosenbaum cast a critical eye on the many attempts to make sense of Hitler hoping to learn what they tell us about such important social assumptions as free will, individual responsibility, and historical determinism. He concluded,

though, that we may lack sufficient historical evidence to answer once and for all the key questions about Hitler’s malignant personality.

And yet, given the enormity of Hitler’s crimes, it doesn’t seem right to give up; hence the search continues, as scholars return to “the unpleasant subject”—Golo Mann’s wry euphemism for the Führer—in search of explanations. The latest study holding out the promise of illumination is *Hitler’s Private Library*. Formerly a Harvard lecturer and cofounder of the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation, Timothy Ryback currently serves as the deputy

Hitler’s Private Library
The Books That Shaped His Life
by Timothy W. Ryback
Vintage, 320 pp., \$16

secretary general of the Académie Diplomatique Internationale in Paris.

Hitler is commonly regarded as a book-burner, not a book-lover; with good reason, his image is that of a demagogic public ranting, not a demure private reader. But Ryback disagrees, claiming that books were central to Hitler’s life and that a thorough analysis of Hitler’s reading will reveal his true nature. He promises not merely to take us into “Hitler’s private library” but, as his subtitle emphasizes, to reveal the books “that shaped his life.” To do this he will inspect the marginalia and inscriptions found in a limited number of books known to have been owned by Hitler and thereby reconstruct the role these books played at critical stages in his life.

“Like footprints in the sand,” he asserts, Hitler’s handwritten marginal comments “allow us to see where his attention caught and lingered, where it rushed ahead, where a question was raised or an impression formed.”

Ryback’s claim about the importance of books to Hitler is certainly plausible. Intimates of Hitler from his earliest appearances in Munich to his final days in Berlin testify that he read voraciously. One described his nocturnal reading habits as “one book per night, either at his desk or in his armchair, always with a cup of tea,” and another claimed that “the very first piece of furniture” for his Munich apartment “was a wooden bookcase, which he quickly filled with books from friends and antiquarian bookshops.” Photographs of Hitler immersed in reading or surrounded by books—several of which are reproduced here—seemingly cement the connection. Reliable historical reports estimate that Hitler’s personal library, divided between Berchtesgaden and Berlin, grew to well over 16,000 volumes by the 1940s. Dozens of books were at his bedside in the bunker.

Moreover, it’s easy to believe that our minds are affected if not determined by what we read. Thus Ryback calls attention to Pope’s famous admonition—*A little learning is a dangerous thing / Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring*—about the ill effects of ill-digested books. Ryback also draws methodological support for his inquiry from a lively

personal essay by Walter Benjamin, entitled “Unpacking My Library.” In this essay Benjamin, reviewing the contents of his own personal library in 1931, reflects on how a book collector’s true character is revealed through the books that he accumulates over time. As Ryback explains in his preface:

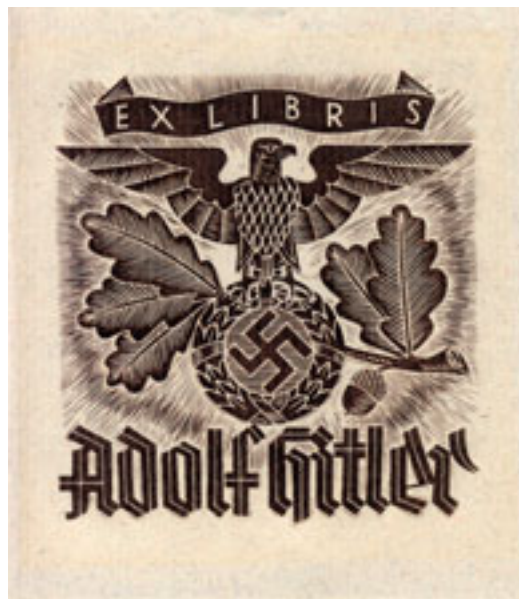
Benjamin proposed that a private library serves as a permanent and credible witness to the character of its collector, leading him to the following philosophic conceit: We collect books in the belief that we are preserving them when in fact it is the books that preserve their collector. “Not that they come alive in him,” Benjamin posited. “It is he who lives in them.”

Ryback embraces this conceit wholeheartedly, and his *modus operandi* is to single out surviving books from Hitler’s library that seem to have played an important part in his life. He tells us a bit about each book’s author and contents and then uses the books as a springboard to discuss broader historical issues that influenced the development of Hitler’s *Weltanschauung*. For example, in the opening chapter, Ryback relates how, during World War I, Hitler walked into the French town Fournes one day while serving as a message runner on the Western Front and purchased an architectural history of Berlin by the celebrated art critic Max Osborn. The book, a chauvinistic paean to Prussian grace, constitutes one of the earliest traces of Hitler’s lifelong obsession with the German capital. It survives, smudged and paraffin-stained, in the Library of Congress’s rare book collection. Examining it, Ryback notes how it “evidently spoke to the young Austrian corporal as indicated by the volume’s dog-eared pages and broken spine.” With even greater insight, Ryback observes how the very purchase of the book reveals the artistic ambitions that consumed Hitler:

In November 1915, for a frontline corporal to pay four marks for a book on cultural treasures of Berlin, when cigarettes, schnapps, and women were readily available for immediate and palpable distraction, can be seen as an act of aesthetic transcendence.

It is a telling anecdote that reveals Hitler’s aesthetic bent of mind and his lifelong interest in the arts, which, as Frederic Spotts has observed in *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* (2003), would prove to be as intense as his racism.

In the following chapter Ryback discusses an inscribed copy of a German stage adaptation of Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, given to Hitler when he was in his early thirties. Hitler received the book as a gift from Dietrich Eckart, who ran a publishing house that specialized in anti-Semitic literature and



was, according to Ryback, the man who “scripted Hitler’s role as history’s most infamous anti-Semite.” Ryback speculates on the appeal that *Peer Gynt*—the story of a youth from a provincial Norwegian village who is intent on becoming “king of the world”—would have had for Hitler and uses Eckart’s biography to explore the early days of the Nazi party in Munich.

Ryback knows the history of this period exceptionally well, and has a good eye for spotting and highlighting revealing vignettes; the links he establishes between the books and the life invariably make for absorbing reading. All told, he concludes that Hitler seems to have read (surprise!) mostly rightwing and racist books by Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Paul Lagarde, and Henry Ford that the Nazi publisher

J. F. Lehmann gave him over the years.

When it came to literature, Ernst Jünger’s battlefield memoir *Fire and Blood* seems to have exercised a considerable attraction on Hitler during a period when he considered writing a war memoir of his own. Needless to say, Hitler was persuaded by Jünger’s insistence upon “the transformative effects of slaughter” and “the hardening of heart and soul” that occurs in combat. Hitler also had a penchant for the Saxon novelist Karl May’s Wild West adventure stories, which he had reissued in a special field edition for German soldiers at the front and later recommended to his military commanders as manuals of strategy. (Don’t blame the innocent May, whose entertaining tales of the wise Apache Chief Winnetou and his “white blood brother” Old Shatterhand were also a favorite of Albert Einstein.)

On the whole, however, what we may call serious literature held no interest for Hitler, and is totally absent from his surviving library. In its place Ryback notes scores of books devoted to Hitler’s lifelong preoccupation with the occult—the prophecies of Nostradamus and the like—together with works that deliriously describe the interaction between the realms of matter and spirit. A personal favorite of Hitler’s in this latter category was a man by

the name of Ernst Schertel, who wrote a dense tome “proving,” so he thought, how the creative, “truly ektropic” (sic), genius possessed the demonic power to free himself from empirical realities and, in effect, will new worlds into existence through sheer force of personality. And so on, up to Ryback’s final chapter on how Hitler’s reading of Thomas Carlyle’s *History of Frederick the Great* gave him hope in the bunker that, somehow, Germany would win the war.

Ryback deserves praise for his investigative labors and, especially in our increasingly virtual and digitalized age, for recognizing what the physical nature of books may reveal about their owners. He also deserves a reader’s gratitude for being a graceful and interesting writer.

Nevertheless, Ryback’s approach is seriously flawed. First, as he himself

readily admits, only a small part of Hitler's library was available to him for study: More than 10,000 of the books that made up Hitler's private library are gathering dust somewhere in Russia after having been trucked out of Berlin by the Red Army. As a result, Ryback had access to only 1,300 books (almost all of them now at the Library of Congress) and concentrated on only 120 to 150 that could have been personally significant to Hitler. We have no idea whether the books that he examines are representative.

Second, Ryback has an exaggerated faith in what marginal notations can reveal. In this respect he calls to mind the touching, naïve figure of Tatyana, a character in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, who attempts to unlock Onegin's mind by entering his library and examining his marginalia. Marginal notes as a window into the soul? It's a truly romantic notion, one that Ryback hypes ever further by writing portentously about how "a penciled mark [in the margin of a book owned by a dictator] can become state doctrine." But in fact, Hitler's "trenchant marks" are not very revealing: Only several dozen books contain handwritten marginalia that seem convincingly to have been inscribed by Hitler, and in these cases, most of the markings are limited to penciled underlinings or exclamation marks.

Ryback exaggerates Hitler's intellectual seriousness. Just as Nazi ideology itself was, in the words of the German political scientist Karl Dietrich Bracher, essentially "an eclectic conglomeration of ideas and ways of thinking," Hitler himself was little more than (to refer once more to Frederic Spotts) "a notorious pickpocket in the marketplace of ideas." For this reason, any attempt to unlock Hitler's character by examining the remnants of his library is ultimately unconvincing. Hitler did claim to be an obsessive reader—but even if that were believable, being an obsessive reader is not the same thing as being a selective or thoughtful one. Ryback himself points to Hitler's method of reading, as disclosed in *Mein Kampf*: First you decide what you want to know, then you collect information that confirms what you already believe. Hitler did not read

to expand his knowledge, and his earliest and perhaps greatest education came from stridently nationalistic and anti-Semitic newspapers, not from books.

Ryback seems ultimately to have fallen prey to what Ron Rosenbaum termed "the pseudosophisticated snares of explanation." Hitler once claimed to have carried Schopenhauer's five-volume collected works in his knapsack throughout the Great War, and yet we

know that he couldn't even spell the philosopher's name correctly. He was more of a mountebank than an intellectual, the kind who used books as props to advertise his genius to others.

Ryback did well to look to Walter Benjamin for guidance, but overlooked the truly pertinent *aperçu* found in notes that Benjamin took for an unfinished essay on Hitler: "So much luster surrounding so much shabbiness." ♦
