

YAD VASHEM STUDIES

XXXIII

Edited by

DAVID SILBERKLANG



YAD VASHEM
THE HOLOCAUST MARTYRS' AND HEROES'
REMEMBRANCE AUTHORITY

JERUSALEM 2005

THE ROLE OF HITLER IN THE "FINAL SOLUTION"

Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936–1945: Nemesis* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2005, 995 pages

Reviewed by

OTTO DOV KULKA

The publication of the second part of Ian Kershaw's monumental biography of Hitler, in 2000, more than confirmed this reviewer's initial evaluation of the preceding volume (covering the years 1889–1936) as one of the most significant books on National Socialism to appear in recent years.¹ While *Hubris*² — beyond the chronological scope of its narrative — laid the grounds for understanding the entire period of National-Socialist rule, *Nemesis*³ carries the inquiry, which is conceptually and methodologically unprecedented, through all the concrete developments in the years of their ultimate realization.

The remarkable success of the Hebrew edition of the first volume⁴ — the book appeared on the nonfiction bestseller list for

- 1 See my comments in my review of Saul Friedländer's *Nazi Germany and the Jews. Vol. I: The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), in *Zion. A Quarterly for Research in Jewish History*, vol. LXVI, 1 (2001), p. 109 (Hebrew).
- 2 Vol. 1 of Kershaw's Hitler biography: *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris* (London: Penguin, 1998).
- 3 Vol. 2: *Hitler 1936–1945: Nemesis* (London: Penguin, 2000).
- 4 *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003).

twenty successive weeks — far exceeded the somewhat skeptical expectations of Kershaw himself. He was certain that the demand in the small Israeli market would have substantially been met by the English edition, which had already been available for several years.

Yet there were several reasons for Israelis' fascination with Kershaw's Hitler biography. The most obvious one can be found in Kershaw's own remark in the preface to the first volume on the relative undervaluation of one specific aspect in previous Hitler biographies: "It is surprising ... how little anti-Jewish policy and the genesis of the 'Final Solution' figured in such earlier biographies."⁵

One can hardly find another biography of Hitler and only a few general historical studies on Nazi Germany in which the centrality of the "Jewish question" as a key to understanding Nazi ideology and politics is presented in such a detailed and persuasive way. Indeed, Kershaw's work, which far transcends the usual biographical framework, can be regarded as one of the most important studies of the developments toward and the realization of the "Final Solution."⁶

Kershaw interweaves all the social and political aspects of the "Final Solution," and its centrality in National-Socialist ideology and politics is clearly revealed in its destructive world historical significance. Kershaw, a British (non-Jewish) historian, spent a good part of his scholarly development closely attached to German historiography yet also maintained a prolonged and fruitful

5 Hebrew edition, p. 10. Among the best-known earlier Hitler biographies: Alan Bullock, *Hitler. A Study in Tyranny* (London: Odhams Press, 1952); Joachim Fest, *Hitler: eine Biographie* (West Berlin: Propylaen, 1973) (English edition — *Hitler* [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974]). Both were published in Hebrew as well: Bullock's work in 1974 (Tel Aviv: HaKibbutz HaMeuhad) and Fest's in 1986 (Jerusalem: Keter).

6 See my survey of the historiography on the Jews under the Nazi regime in the last decade of the twentieth century in the first part of my review of Saul Friedländer's *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, in *Zion*, vol. LXVI, 1 (2001), pp. 109–112.

dialogue with several Israeli historians. As such, he offers an answer to one of the most crucial questions relating to the Israelis' collective memory and to the public and scholarly discourse in Israel: the enigma of the Jewish fate and the significant role of the anti-Jewish component in European history in its most serious crisis in modern times.

These questions are posed even more concretely — and decisively answered — in Kershaw's second volume, now also available in Hebrew. It covers the period from the second part of the 1930s to the genocidal world war and the Holocaust, up to the collapse of the Third Reich:

... what the second part of this study attempts to grasp: how Hitler could exercise the absolute power which he had been permitted to acquire ... and how the citizens of this modern state became complicitous in genocidal war of a character hitherto unknown to mankind, resulting in state-sponsored mass murder on a scale never previously witnessed, continent-wide devastation, and the final ruination of their own country ... as part of a calamitous destruction of European civilization.⁷

His concise answers appear in the first, introductory chapter:

For most dictators, the acquisition of unrivalled power over the state would have been enough. For Hitler, this was no end in itself. In his thinking, power served a twin ideological purpose: destroying the Jews — for him, Germany's mortal enemy; and, through their destruction, acquiring mastery over the entire continent of Europe — a platform for subsequent world dominance. Both interlocking aims, resting on a "world-view" that saw racial struggle and survival of the fittest as the key determinants in human history, had been central to his thinking since the 1920s. However uncharted the route to attaining them, these basic ideas, once formed, never left him. The obsessiveness and tenacity with

7 Kershaw, vol 2: *Hitler 1936-1945: Nemesis*, p. xviii.

which he held to these fixed ideas were part of Hitler's unique role in steering Germany, Europe, and the world to disaster.⁸

Kershaw's answers, though, are not limited to Hitler's personality, his dictatorship, and his ideological goals. According to his central thesis of "working towards the *Führer*," to which I will return later, they relate to the whole German society in its various components:

He was able as no one else to give voice to popular hatreds, resentments, hopes, and expectations. He spoke more stridently, more vehemently, more expressively and appealingly than any of those with a similar ideological message. He was the mouthpiece of the nationalist masses at a decisive time of all-embracing national crisis. ...⁹

In such ways, Hitler's fixed points of ideology — "removal of the Jews" and preparations for a future titanic struggle to attain "living-space" — acted as such broad and compelling long-term goals that they could easily embrace the differing interests of those agencies which formed the vital pillars of the Nazi regime. As a result, the instruments of a highly modern state — bureaucracy, economy, and, not least, army — in the heart of Europe increasingly bound themselves to Hitler's "charismatic" authority, to the politics of national salvation and the dream of European mastery embodied in the personalized "vision" and power of one man. Hitler's essential, unchanging, distant goals had inexorably become the driving-force of the entire Nazi regime, constituting the framework for the extraordinary energy and dynamism that permeated the entire system of rule. It was a dynamism which knew no terminal point of domination ...¹⁰

The centrality of the "Jewish question" in Hitler's messianic vision and its broad reverberations in German society were not evident in Kershaw's earlier works on Hitler and the Third Reich. A study he wrote for the Institut für Zeitgeschichte in 1980 — *Der Hitler-*

8 Ibid., p. xli.

9 Ibid., p. xli.

10 Ibid., pp. xlv-xlvi.

Mythos, Volksmeinung und Propaganda im Dritten Reich ("The Hitler Myth, People's Opinion and Propaganda in the Third Reich")¹¹ — did not include a special chapter or section on the "Jewish question." But in the English edition, which appeared seven years later, he notes in the preface: "I have provided for this version a completely new Introduction and Conclusion, and also an entirely new Chapter 9 on Hitler's Popular Image and the 'Jewish Question' — an area which I had deliberately, but mistakenly (I later felt) omitted from the German text."¹²

Three main areas in Kershaw's research on Nazi Germany over the last twenty-five years equipped him extremely well for his major task: the attitudes of German society toward the National-Socialist regime, including the attitude to the "solution of the Jewish question;"¹³ his studies on the historiography of National

- 11 Ian Kershaw, *Der Hitler-Mythos. Volksmeinung und Propaganda im Dritten Reich* (Stuttgart: Schriftenreihe der Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte, 1980).
- 12 Ian Kershaw, *The 'Hitler Myth.' Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), p. vii. He also added this chapter and an explanation of its significance to the revised German edition: "... ein ganz offensichtlich wichtiges Thema... Es handelt vom Platz des Antisemitismus im Hitler-Image der Bevölkerung": Ian Kershaw, *Der Hitler-Mythos. Führerkult und Volksmeinung* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1999), p. 10.
- 13 In this area the most significant studies were *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria 1933-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983); (for a critical review of the chapters dealing with the "Jewish question," see Otto Dov Kulka and Aron Rodrigue, "The German Population and the Jews in the Third Reich. Recent Publications and Trends of Research on German Society and the 'Jewish Question,'" in *Yad Vashem Studies*, vol. 16, 1984, pp. 421-435); and his articles "The Persecution of the Jews and German Popular Opinion in the Third Reich" in *Year Book of the Leo Baeck Institute*, vol. XXVI (1981), pp. 261-289; "German Popular Opinion and the 'Jewish Question,' 1939-1943: Some further Reflections," in Arnold Paucker, ed., *Die Juden im Nationalsozialistischen Deutschland — The Jews in Nazi Germany 1933-1943* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1986), pp. 365-388; and "German Popular Opinion during the Final Solution: Information, Comprehension, Reactions," in Asher Cohen et al., eds., *Comprehending the Holocaust: Historical and Literary Research* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1988), pp. 145-158.

Socialism and the Third Reich;¹⁴ and his previous studies on Hitler and the German society.¹⁵ Beyond these three areas, Kershaw's most important empirical research on the Jewish aspect prior to his Hitler biography is his pioneering study "Improvised Genocide? The Emergence of the 'Final Solution' in the 'Warthegau.'"¹⁶ Here he already described, on a regional scale, the dynamics of seemingly uncontrolled, autonomous initiatives of mass murder in the initial stages of the "Final Solution," which unswervingly followed the "Führer's will."

The new central thesis, which enabled Kershaw to integrate both his most detailed primary research and the most important recently published monographs on the subject, was the concept of "working towards the *Führer*." Among other advantages, it offered a way out of the longstanding sterile methodological discussions revolving around the "intentionalist" and "functionalist" approaches.¹⁷

Kershaw published his innovative thesis in the seminal essay "'Working Towards the *Führer*.' Reflections on the Nature of the

- 14 The most comprehensive studies in the area of historiography appeared in the four subsequent and updated editions between 1985 and 2000: his authoritative work *The Nazi Dictatorship. Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (first edition, London: E. Arnold, 1985; fourth edition, London: E. Arnold, 2000). The fourth edition includes, in addition to the chapters on "Hitler and the Holocaust" (ch. 5) and "'Normality' and Genocide: The Problem of 'Historicisation'" [of National Socialism and the Holocaust] (ch. 9), a concluding historiographical discussion on "Shifting Perspectives: Historiographical Trends in the Aftermath of Unification" (ch. 10), which also deals with the great Goldhagen controversy.
- 15 Kershaw's previous books on Hitler were the aforementioned *The 'Hitler Myth'* and a concise volume, *Hitler*, in Longman's series "Profiles of Power" (Ian Kershaw, *Hitler* [London and New York: Longman, 1991]), as well as his article on the critical edition of Hitler's speeches and other texts: "Ideologue and Propagandist: Hitler in Light of His Speeches, Writings and Orders, 1925-1928," in *Yad Vashem Studies*, vol. 23 (1993), pp. 321-334.
- 16 In *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th Series, vol. 2 (1992), pp. 51-78.
- 17 On the limitations and growing irrelevance of these two polarized modes of interpretation see my article "Major Trends and Tendencies in German Historiography on National Socialism and the 'Jewish Question,'" in Israel Gutman and Gideon Greif, eds., *The Historiography of the Holocaust Period*

Hitler Dictatorship." He epitomized the "function of Hitler's 'charismatic' *Führer* position" as "threefold: that of unifier, of activator, and of enabler in the Third Reich."¹⁸ "As *unifier*, the 'idea' incorporated in the quasi-deified *Führer* figure was sufficiently indistinct but dynamic to act as a bond" for all the factions of the Nazi movement and the non-Nazi conservative elites, and provided the "main prop" of popular support, repeatedly giving Hitler a plebiscitary basis for his action. As *activator*, the "vision" embodied by Hitler served as a stimulant for activism, carried out in Hitler's name within and beyond the Nazi movement. It provided the "guidelines for action" in improvising ever-new initiatives closely related to Hitler's ideological imperatives. Most important, according to Kershaw, was Hitler's capacity as *enabler*, in which his authority gave implicit backing and sanction to actions, which, however inhuman and however radical, were more or less guaranteed sanction from above.

Kershaw subsequently developed this methodological approach in his full-scale biography,¹⁹ where its theoretical grounds are elaborated, and applied it in his empirical research. The epigraphs of the final chapter of the first volume ("Working Towards the *Führer*") quote a maxim articulated by a state official in 1934, and a secret opinion report from 1936:

It is the duty of every single person to attempt, in the spirit of the *Führer*, to work towards him (Werner Willikens, 21 February 1934).

(Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1988), pp. 36–37; see also Ulrich Herbert, "Vernichtungspolitik. Neue Antworten und Fragen zur Geschichte des 'Holocaust,'" in idem, ed., *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik 1939–1945. Neue Forschungen und Kontroversen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1998), p. 22 (in English: *National Socialist Extermination Policies: Contemporary German Perspectives and Controversies* [New York: Berghahn, 2000]).

18 In *Contemporary European History*, vol. 2, 2 (1993), pp. 103–118, cit. p. 113f.

19 In the first volume, *Hubris*, notably in the preface, the introductory chapter "Reflecting on Hitler" (pp. xxix–xxx), and the closing chapter "Working Towards the *Führer*."

The *Führer* had for outward appearances to ban individual actions against the Jews in consideration of foreign policy, but in reality was wholly in agreement that each individual should continue on his own initiative the fight against Jewry in the most rigorous and radical form (Reported opinion in Hessen, March 1936).²⁰

In the introductory section to this chapter, Kershaw elucidates some of the principal points in this connection:

The decisive component was ... Hitler's personalized form of rule [which] invited radical initiatives from below and offered such initiatives backing, so long as they were in line with his broadly defined goals. This promoted ferocious competition at all levels of the regime ... through anticipating the "*Führer* will" and, without waiting for directives, taking initiatives to promote what were presumed to be Hitler's aims and wishes. For party functionaries and ideologues and for SS "technocrats of power," "working towards the *Führer*" could have a literal meaning. But, metaphorically, ordinary citizens ... were — whatever their motives — indirectly "working towards the *Führer*." They were as a consequence helping drive on an unstoppable radicalization which saw the gradual emergence in concrete shape of policy objectives embodied in the "mission" of the *Führer*.

Through "working towards the *Führer*," initiatives were taken, pressures created, legislation instigated — all in ways which fell into line with what were taken to be Hitler's aims, and without the dictator necessarily having to dictate. The result was continuing radicalization of policy in a direction which brought Hitler's own ideological imperatives more plainly into view as practicable policy options.²¹

In the following part of the review I will focus upon a few main points regarding the second volume. The introductory chapter to the second volume, "1936: Hitler Triumphant," is the exposition of the entire subject, Kershaw's thesis and methodology. This

20 Ibid., p. 527.

21 Ibid., p. 530.

masterly presentation of a historiographical concept is indeed characteristic of the entire book. Although the point of departure is Hitler himself and the political dimension, foreign and internal, all the main areas and subjects that shaped the Third Reich build the background for this presentation. These include politics, society, economy, elites, resistance from below, the question of opposition from within the regime, the churches and the *Kirchenkampf*, the broad plebiscitary support for the *Führer*, and, last but not least, Hitler's radical antisemitism, which was widely shared in its various forms by different sections of society. In all these descriptions of the general euphoria, the signs of imminent and, indeed, inevitable radicalization are clearly marked in Hitler's concepts.

Returning to the subject of anti-Jewish policy and the "Final Solution," I wish to draw special attention on the way in which Kershaw explores the "Marks of a Genocidal Mentality" (the title of Chapter 3) on the eve of the "*Reichskristallnacht*" and after. The detailed investigation of the manifold signs of radicalization in the attitude toward the Jews and the mounting expressions of "annihilation" in the various sources is wisely summarized in the conclusion: "This was not a preview of Auschwitz and Treblinka. But without such a mentality Auschwitz and Treblinka would not have been possible" (p. 152).

This comment and the analysis of Hitler's abstract intentions — "how the war would bring about the destruction of the Jews" — might be regarded as a keynote, leading directly to the chapters dealing with the war in the East and the "Final Solution."

In Chapter 8, "Designing a 'War of Annihilation,'" Kershaw analyzes the genocidal intentions, intertwined with the preparations for and launching of the war against the "Jewish Bolshevik menace," and examines its broad acceptance in this intertwined sense by all the elites and the masses of future German participants in the war. I quote from the chapter's closing paragraphs:

By March [1941], Hitler had laid down the parameters of a

genocidal war which willing agents in the Wehrmacht as well as the SS leadership were only too ready to translate into firm guidelines for action.

The war in the East, which would decide the future of the Continent of Europe, was indeed Hitler's war. But it was more than that. It was not inflicted by a tyrannical dictator on an unwilling country. It was acceded to, even welcomed (if in different measure and for different reasons), by all sections of the German elite, non-Nazi as well as Nazi. Large sections of the ordinary German population, too, including the millions who would fight in lowly ranks in the army, would — once they had got over their initial shock — go along with the meaning Nazi propaganda imparted to the conflict, that of a "crusade against Bolshevism." The more ideologically committed pro-Nazis would entirely swallow the interpretation of the war as a preventive one to avoid the destruction of western culture by the Bolshevik hordes. They fervently believed that Europe would never be liberated before "Jewish-Bolshevism" was utterly and completely rooted out. The path to the Holocaust, intertwined with the showdown with Bolshevism, was prefigured in such notions. The legacy of over two decades of deeply rooted, often fanatically held, feelings of hatred towards Bolshevism, fully interlaced with anti-Semitism, was about to be revealed in its full ferocity (p. 389).

The central, most tragic chapter, on "Fulfilling the 'Prophecy'" of the "Final Solution,"²² is a continuation of the methodology in the two chapters mentioned above. Here the figure of Hitler looms behind the dramatic developments more than previously, but, again, it is clearly demonstrated that there was no need for a special order for the "Final Solution." It was "worked out" toward the *Führer* in many ways by almost everyone involved. This methodology and these motifs underlie all the following chapters of the dreadful

22 Chapter 10, "Fulfilling the 'Prophecy,'" pp. 459–495. Kershaw later devoted a particular study to Hitler's various prophetic utterances on the "annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe" in their controversial historiographical context: Ian Kershaw, "Hitler's Prophecy and the 'Final Solution,'" in Moshe Zimmermann, ed., *Three Generations of Historians on Germans and Jews under the Nazi Regime* (forthcoming).

drama, up to the "Extinction" (Chapter 17, pp. 795–828) and the "Epilogue" (pp. 829–841).

The attractiveness of Kershaw's book, which has been translated into several languages, also owes much to the rare combination of its scholarly character and literary style. A great deal of it is based on direct quotation of, or reference to, the relevant sources or specific research literature. The scholarly apparatus itself constitutes nearly a third of the book. And yet, the impressive, thoughtful, and dramatic style of the narration makes the reading of the book — if one may say so, in light of its subject — an exciting literary experience. Last but not least is the omnipresent personal humanistic approach, which pervades Kershaw's narrative and his assessments, somewhere between personal moral engagement and strict scholarly detachment.

The publication of the Hebrew edition by Am Oved Publishers and the Richard Koebner Center for German History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem can be regarded as one of the most valuable contributions to the relatively small number of important works in the historiography on Nazi Germany and the Holocaust translated into Hebrew. Among the most important ones published in the last decade, we might also mention the excellent first volume of Saul Friedländer's *Nazi Germany and the Jews*.²³ It is to be hoped that the forthcoming second volume will be translated into Hebrew as quickly as the first one. Another comprehensive book is the fourth volume of the collective work, edited by Michael A. Meyer, *German-Jewish History in Modern Times: Renewal and Destruction 1918–1945*.²⁴ (The last, complementary volume on

23 Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*. Vol. I: *The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997 [Hebrew edition — Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1997]).

24 Michael A. Meyer, ed., *German-Jewish History in Modern Times. Vol. 4: Renewal and Destruction 1918–1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996 [Hebrew edition — Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2005]).

the daily life of German Jews in this period²⁵ will be published soon in Hebrew by the Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, Jerusalem.) No less important was the above-cited innovative volume of essays, *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik 1939–1945*,²⁶ which was published in Hebrew by Yad Vashem. In addition, in the framework of its series *The Comprehensive History of the Holocaust*, Yad Vashem published the English and Hebrew editions of Christopher R. Browning's excellent seminal volume, *The Origins of the Final Solution*, covering the years 1939–1942.²⁷ Quite important, too, is the recently established bilingual series of articles published by Yad Vashem, *Search and Research*, in which several valuable papers have already appeared, such as those by Michael Wildt²⁸ and Nicolas Berg.²⁹

On the other hand, the valuable bilingual English-Hebrew series of Yad Vashem international historical conferences, edited for many years by Israel Gutman, which has produced such important volumes as *Patterns of Jewish Leadership in Nazi Europe 1933–1945*,³⁰ *The Nazi Concentration Camps. Structure and Aims. The*

- 25 Marion Kaplan, ed., *Jewish Daily Life in Germany, 1618–1945* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 26 Ulrich Herbert, ed., *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik 1939–1945. Neue Forschungen und Kontroversen* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998 [Hebrew edition — Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2001]).
- 27 Christopher R. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution. The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy: September 1939–March 1942* (with contributions by Jürgen Matthäus) (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press and Yad Vashem, 2004 [Hebrew edition — Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2004]).
- 28 Michael Wildt, "Generation of the Unbound. The Leadership Corps of the Reich Security Main Office," *Search and Research. Lectures and Papers*, no. 3 (2002).
- 29 Nicolas Berg, "The Invention of 'Functionalism.' Josef Wulf, Martin Broszat, and the Institute for Contemporary History (Munich) in the 1960s," *Search and Research. Lectures and Papers*, no. 4 (2003).
- 30 Israel Gutman and Cynthia J. Haft, eds., *Patterns of Jewish Leadership in Nazi Europe 1933–1945* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1979).

Image of the Prisoner. The Jews in the Camps,³¹ and *The Historiography of the Holocaust Period*,³² continued to appear during the last decade, but only in their English editions. No doubt that it would be most desirable to make the two important volumes, *Probing the Depths of German Antisemitism*³³ and *Nazi Europe and the Final Solution*³⁴ accessible also to the Hebrew-reading public.

To close with Yossi Milo's translation of the second volume of Ian Kershaw's *Hitler*, it is noteworthy that, like the first volume, it is fluent and exact, and, what is not always the case in works of history translated into Hebrew, has received reliable, meticulous, scholarly editing.

31 Israel Gutman and Avital Saf, eds., *The Nazi Concentration Camps. Structure and Aims. The Image of the Prisoner. The Jews in the Camps* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1984).

32 Israel Gutman and Gideon Greif, eds., *The Historiography of the Holocaust Period* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1998).

33 David Bankier, ed., *Probing the Depths of German Antisemitism* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2000).

34 David Bankier and Israel Gutman, eds., *Nazi Europe and the Final Solution* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2003).