

6-1-2010

Hitlers Judenhass. Klischee und Wirklichkeit, by Ralf Georg Reuth

Gavriel D. Rosenfeld

Fairfield University, grosenfeld@fairfield.edu

© 2010 by Cambridge University Press. Original published version can be found at DOI: 10.1017/S0008938910000233

Peer Reviewed

Repository Citation

Rosenfeld, Gavriel D., "Hitlers Judenhass. Klischee und Wirklichkeit, by Ralf Georg Reuth" (2010). *History Faculty Publications*. Paper 16.

<http://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/history-facultypubs/16>

Published Citation

Rosenfeld, Gavriel. "Hitlers Judenhass. Klischee und Wirklichkeit, by Ralf Georg Reuth." *Central European History* 43.2 (Jun 2010): 380-383.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

Schmitt continues unabated and that Schmitt now extensively influences legal, political, historical, and cultural theory across Europe and America.

JOSEPH W. BENDERSKY
VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY
doi:10.1017/S0008938910000221

Hitlers Judenhass. Klischee und Wirklichkeit. By Ralf Georg Reuth.
Munich: Piper Verlag. 2009. Pp. 374. Cloth €22.95. ISBN
9783492051774.

Ralf Georg Reuth's new book is a well-written and insightful study on an important subject—the origins of Hitler's anti-Semitism. Yet, while many of his claims are provocative and deserve serious consideration, his book on the whole promises somewhat more than it delivers.

In his introduction, Reuth explains that his main goal is to historicize Hitler's anti-Semitism in the sense called for by Martin Broszat in the 1980s. Significantly, he defends one of the more controversial figures who pursued this process of historicization at the time, Ernst Nolte, who famously linked the crimes of the Nazis to those of the Bolsheviks and, in the process, helped to spark the Historians' Debate of 1986–87. Reuth takes Nolte's claims about the Nazis' fears of Bolshevism seriously and makes it a major theme of his analysis. But he also links it to a second goal—that of challenging the contention that the Nazis' crimes against the Jews were part of a longstanding tradition of German anti-Semitism rooted in a "special path of development" (*Sonderentwicklung*) (p. 12). Reuth associates Daniel Goldhagen with this claim, but spends most of his book criticizing Ian Kershaw for adhering to it as well. Kershaw, as well as Allan Bullock and Joachim Fest, come under frequent attack by Reuth for having overemphasized the German roots of Nazism and overlooked the connection between its emergence after 1918 and fears of Bolshevism. While this is a serious claim, Reuth's defense of Nolte in his introduction—like his favorable citation of conservatives such as Rainer Zitelmann and Martin Walser—suggests that his overall project is about normalizing the German historical record. Reuth assures readers that his analysis "changes nothing about Hitler's monstrosity. . . . indeed, it makes it even greater" (p. 19). Yet, his rigid focus on Hitler's evil may be seen as serving the apologetic purpose of masking other factors from German history that explain the Holocaust.

The strongest sections of Reuth's book come at the beginning, which are devoted to challenging Hitler's representation of himself in *Mein Kampf* as a

veteran anti-Semite. Claiming that most scholars have taken Hitler's claims at face value (he singles out Fest and Kershaw), Reuth draws on the work of Brigitte Hamann and Anton Joachimsthaler to argue that there is no evidence that Hitler was a committed Jew-hater before spring 1919. Hitler's social and business contacts with Jews in Vienna, the absence of any signs of anti-Jewish prejudice from his time in Munich prior to 1914, and the fact that in August 1918 he was awarded the Iron Cross by a Jewish superior officer (Hugo Guttmann, whom Reuth persuasively surmises never would have granted such an award to a known anti-Semite) are all evidence of this.

Indeed, Reuth goes on to claim that Hitler was far from being on the political right at all, arguing that following the end of World War I, he was open to radical ideas and leaned more toward the existing *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD)-led government. Like other demobilized soldiers, Hitler, Reuth claims, had developed an egalitarian kind of "trench socialism" during the war and shed no tears at the demise of the aristocratic Hohenzollern monarchy in 1918. Crucial evidence of Hitler's left-wing leanings is provided by his close association with the postwar workers' and soldiers' councils (or *Räte*) in revolutionary Bavaria. After returning to Munich at the end of November 1918, he soon went to the nearby town of Traunstein, where he worked as a military guard at a *Räte*-run prisoner-of-war (POW) camp overseeing Russian prisoners. He returned to Munich at the end of January or early February, at which time a remarkable photograph proves that he attended the funeral of the assassinated revolutionary Bavarian prime minister, Kurt Eisner. (Tellingly, in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler postdated his return to March to make it seem that he had never been in the city). The clincher, for Reuth, however, is that Hitler was appointed to a position in his infantry regiment responsible for demobilizing soldiers and educating them on the subject of "Democracy or *Räte*" (a position for which he never would have been considered had he been a rabid anti-Semite) and that on April 16, 1919, he actually received the second-most votes for the position of *Ersatzbataillonrat* in a regiment that, by now, had been absorbed into the Red Army of the communist-led Bavarian Soviet Republic (which had been proclaimed on April 13, 1919). As Reuth writes, "It is hard to believe, but . . . the man who claimed by this time to have recognized that Bolshevism was the 'demonic instrument [of] International Jewry' was himself a functionary in . . . the communist world revolution!" (p. 94).

For Reuth, two key events in early May 1919 led Hitler to shift to the political right: the crushing of the Bavarian Soviet Republic by White troops on May 2 and the proclamation of the punitive terms of the Treaty of Versailles on May 7. The former [which, like the Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (USPD)-led revolution of November 7, 1918, and the anarchist/communist revolutions of April 1919, was partly led by Jewish leftists] awakened Hitler to the real threat of "Jewish" Bolshevism (as did the

indoctrination course on the subject that he took at the University of Munich as part of his new job in the *Reichswehr* propaganda unit). The latter awakened in him a fierce hatred of the Allies and, more importantly, the SPD-led government, which agreed to the Treaty's terms a month later on June 28, 1919. The key point for Reuth is that Hitler's anti-Bolshevism preceded—and can thus be seen as the catalyst for—his anti-Semitism (p. 145). Furthermore, the Treaty's onerous reparations demands on Germany lent plausibility to the fear that Jewish capitalist interests were working together with “Jewish” Bolsheviks to destroy the nation. By September 1919, Hitler's famous letter to Adolf Gemlich (the first in which he expresses any anti-Jewish views) makes clear that he had crossed over to a doctrinaire embrace of anti-Semitism.

The implication, of course, is that if Hitler's anti-Semitism was influenced by fears of communism in 1919, then his hatred of the Jews—and, by extension, the resulting Holocaust—was less the result of German, than broader European, factors. To be sure, Reuth concedes that Hitler subsequently found his way—thanks to the tutelage of Dietrich Eckart—to the racist ideas of Guido von List, Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels, and Houston Stewart Chamberlain, all of which had roots in nineteenth-century German and Austrian *völkisch* thought. But Reuth says that Hitler's interest in “racial theory” derived from his “Jew-hatred,” not the other way around (p. 198), a claim that reduces the responsibility of the nineteenth-century German intellectual tradition. The same is true of Reuth's claim that an American anti-Semite, Henry Ford, played an important role in, if not shaping, at least legitimizing Hitler's hatred of Jews (a connection he says is overlooked by Kershaw and other scholars). With this claim, however, Reuth overreaches, since while Hitler's embrace of anti-Semitism may well have been determined by contingent factors, the ideas that he went on to embrace did, in fact, have a rich German pedigree, especially those from the *völkisch* realm. After all, in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler explicitly wrote, “From the basic ideas of the general folkish world conception, the National Socialist German Workers Party takes over the essential fundamental traits and . . . forms a political creed.” Reuth, however, ignores the work of George Mosse and Fritz Stern, neither of which are cited in his bibliography, and thus misses an important source of Hitler's ideas.

Reuth's analysis is similarly incomplete in his book's second half, which discusses the evolution of Hitler's anti-Semitism and its role in the Holocaust. The theme of anti-Bolshevism becomes something of an *idée-fixe* for Reuth, when, for example, he explains the Nazis' domestic anti-Semitic policies in the 1930s against the backdrop of enduring fears of Bolshevism instead of internal pressure coming from the ranks of the *Alte Kämpfer*; to cite one instance, he claims that the Comintern's switching over to a position of Anti-Fascism in 1935, not the desire to satisfy the unrealized goals of frustrated SA-men, helped to inspire the Nuremberg Laws. But the most underdeveloped claim involves

the role of Hitler's anti-Semitism in the Final Solution. Reuth is clearly an intentionalist, arguing that Hitler had been thinking of genocide "as early as 1920" (p. 253). But he is not sufficiently thorough in linking the dictator's plans for extermination to the course of World War II. Reuth sees the July 31, 1941, order from Heydrich to Goering about undertaking plans for the Final Solution as issued against the backdrop of a worsening campaign against the Soviet Red Army. And he argues more broadly that "the more successful the Wehrmacht's military operations were, the less urgently Hitler felt measures needed to be taken against the Jews; conversely, the less successful the war became, the more important the Jews' physical destruction" became (pp. 305–06). There has been a long debate about interpreting the connections between the war's course and the decision to kill the Jews, especially whether it was undertaken in a climate of optimism, when the war was going well in spring/summer 1941, or pessimism, once the campaign began to slow down in the fall. Yet, the most authoritative voice on the subject, Christopher Browning, does not appear in Reuth's bibliography, and Reuth thus ignores Browning's persuasive contention that Hitler typically *intensified* his anti-Semitic plans in a spirit of euphoria following key military victories (the *Judenreservat* plan followed the defeat of Poland; the Madagascar Plan followed the defeat of France; the approval of Heydrich's plan for extermination followed the victory in Kiev in October 1941).

This oversight and others notwithstanding, Reuth's book makes a convincing case that Hitler was transformed into an anti-Semite by the events of the immediate post World War I period. Readers may be less persuaded by Reuth's more questionable de-emphasis of the German dimensions of Hitler's anti-Semitism, but his thesis that it was inspired by anti-Bolshevism is worthy of further scholarly consideration.

GAVRIEL D. ROSENFELD
FAIRFIELD UNIVERSITY

doi:10.1017/S0008938910000233

Tropical Zion: General Trujillo, FDR, and the Jews of Sosúa. By Allen Wells. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2009. Pp. 447. Cloth \$99.95. ISBN 978-0822343899. Paper \$27.95. ISBN 978-0-8223-4407-0.

In the early 1940s, several hundred Jewish refugees from Germany and Austria found a safe haven in a remote but beautiful spot on the northern coast of the Dominican Republic. With the explicit backing of the Roosevelt