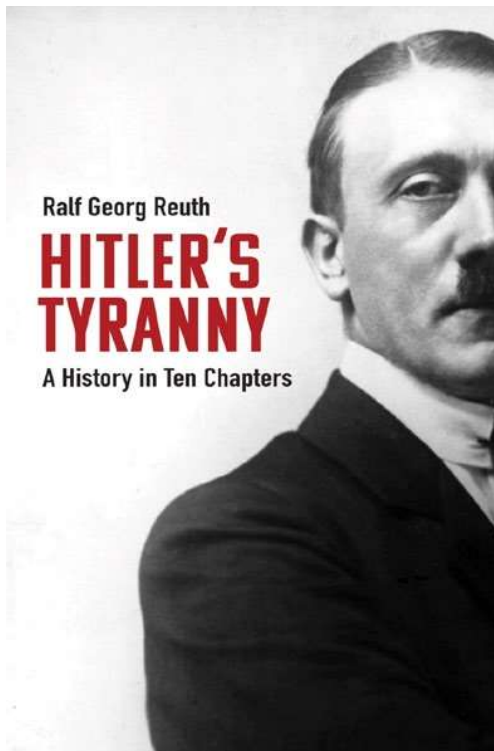


# Book Review: *Hitler's Tyranny: A History in Ten Chapters: The Last Adventurer-Conqueror*

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*The last adventurer-conqueror: A review of Hitler's Tyranny: A history in ten chapters*

By Ralf Georg Reuth, Translated by Peter Lewis

Reviewed by Robert M Kaplan

The 20th century was the most murderous period in history. Between them, Mao Zedong, Josef Stalin and Adolf Hitler killed millions of people. While the first two are relatively neglected compared to Hitler (only third on the list, but the figures are still horrifying), 77 years since he killed himself in the Berlin bunker the tide of books on his life shows no signs of abating.

It started with Alan Bullock's *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, describing him as the last of the adventurer-conquerors. Books that followed gave various explanations for Hitler's rise to power and

his tyrannical rule. Not all could be taken seriously. *The Hidden Hitler* portrayed him as a raging queen, seducing soldiers in the trenches, cross-dressing and intimate with Rudolf Hess.

There was something of a furore in the 1960s with the *Historikerstreit*, a dispute with those German historians who portrayed Hitler as a mere puppet manipulated by the forces around him. This did not last; however, one consequence was the 1968 revolutionaries, notably Baader-Meinhof, reacting to the denial of culpability of German citizens in the Holocaust. Germany had the best historians in the world, but some lost their objectivity after World War 1. Had they done their job properly, the 'stab in the back' myth on which Hitler capitalised would never have had the effect it did.

Over time, the focus of Hitler studies changed, reflecting trends in sociology, culminating in the highly regarded two-volume work by Ian Kershaw. Influenced by Max Weber, Hitler was portrayed as the ultimate charismatic leader who left it to his followers to 'work towards the Führer', anticipating his wishes. Interestingly, Weber died in 1920 when Hitler was still an obscure figure.

The archives have been saturated and no new information will emerge until the Russian archives are fully opened (? post-Putin). If there has been one trend in studies, it has been regarding Hitler's intentions towards Great Britain, a country he regarded as racially acceptable and a potential ally against the unreliable and indulgent Latins (he had few illusions about his Italian ally), as well as the Jewish Bolshevik threat. In Hitler's view, the ideal situation was an alliance that left the British their empire while allowing him to colonise Europe (for example, see *Hitler's American Gamble: Pearl Harbor and the German March to Global War* by Brendan Simms and Charlie Laderman).

This is debatable. As long as Britain remained an enemy island off Europe, Hitler faced the prospect of a two-front war, regarded as the cause of Germany's

failure in World War I. He had not counted on Britain's obdurate refusal—for which Churchill must take some credit—to settle for peace and, after evacuating 380,000 troops at Dunkirk, then winning the Battle of Britain, it remained a permanent threat. Hitler decided that as long as America stayed out of the war, he was safe to follow his primary strategy: the destruction of the Jewish Bolshevik Soviet Union to provide *Lebensraum*, the Eastern colony for German expansion, and, in the process, elimination of Jews for all time.

One school of thought is that he deliberately soft-pedalled the attacks on Britain, holding back from destroying the troops at Dunkirk, hoping that some arrangement could still be made. It is an easy conclusion to draw, but the issues surrounding the Dunkirk decision are not as simple as that.

Now we have *Hitler's Tyranny: A History in Ten Chapters* by Ralf George Reuth,<sup>1</sup> translated from the German original. This thought-provoking study takes aim at the prominent norms of Hitler scholarship over the last 40 years. Reuth challenges a range of orthodox views on such topics as how mainstream politicians facilitated Hitler's rise to power, the Führer's pact with Stalin, and the complicity of ordinary Germans in genocidal tyranny.

Reuth's account courts controversy on several points and offers a fascinating counterpoint to recent scholarship. Following a thematic rather than a chronological approach, Reuth examines 10 questions covering the dictator's rise to power and his rebarbative role in the war. These include: Was anti-Semitism more pronounced in Germany than elsewhere? Was Versailles responsible for Hitler's rise, and why did the Germans follow a racial fanatic like him? How did his war differ from all others before it?

The contrary answers Reuth provides show Hitler was not as much the inevitable consequence of the perturbations of German history but rose to power by capitalising on the chaos with opportunism, deception, and, where necessary, seduction. Analysing Hitler's actions as chancellor and military commander, Reuth portrays him as the antithesis of a specifically German strain of militarism and imperialism, shifting the focus back to Hitler's mindset and *modus operandi*. In all the situations examined, the finding is clear: while the precipitous circumstances following the war led to the chaotic conditions permitting the rise of the dictator—the same circumstances, albeit more protracted, led to Stalin's rise to power.

The myths Reuth sets out to demolish are well known and have received extensive analysis. Hitler intended to go to war at an early stage and was undoubtedly not inexorably drawn into it by the other powers. Britain and France, ducking, weaving and denying, did everything they could to avoid the conflict. While France led, Britain came late to rearming. As predicted by Marxist philosophy, Stalin, for his part, believed the capitalist powers would destroy themselves, leaving Europe open to be taken by the Soviet Union. In this, he was to be quite wrong; gritting their teeth, they were even prepared to have him as an ally to put an end to the German peril.

The problem was one of timing. Hitler aimed to have Germany fully armed for war by 1942–3 but knew that America could not be depended on to stay isolationist. The plan was to strike before the Allied powers were ready. For Hitler, the ultimate gambler, this was no problem. What caught everyone by surprise (possibly even Hitler) was the speed at which France fell, leaving him the undisputed master of Europe. It was a wake-up call for Stalin, who now had no buffer between him and Germany. The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact ultimately proved to be worthless. Soviet rearmament sped up, and the lessons learned from the disastrous campaign against Finland began to apply. As events were to show, this was barely enough to hold on during the first months of the German invasion.

Reuth makes the case that Hitler, from an early stage, intended to go to war with Russia. Where Britain had colonies spanning the globe, Germany needed to expand eastwards, providing them with land and resources to eventually challenge America. What held him back was Britain's survival. *They* could not be a serious threat, Hitler decided, until America joined the war. Once he had conquered Russia, there would be no option but for Britain to surrender.

A much-debated issue was why the German generals ignored the lessons of Napoleon's disastrous failure in the Russian winter in supporting Hitler's decision to invade. Reuth has it right. They were massively overconfident after the fall of France in six weeks. Those who had serious reservations kept it to themselves. Here, we see a characteristic feature of dictatorships. The leader surrounds himself with sycophants who only tell him what he wishes to hear. Any dissenters are expelled or face an even worse fate. It is an astonishing but predictable turn of history for Putin to reprise the same scenario in his failed attempt to invade Ukraine.

Another issue clouding the historical record was Hitler's suicide, removing him from the scene and leaving the generals to hide behind the same excuse: it was all Hitler's fault, and they had no way of resisting his reckless leadership. But the generals had much more to answer for and, in many ways, got away with their collusion in the destruction of the Jews, aside from the few token figures who were called to account.

Another issue is the vaunted efficiency of the German military. They did have the best generals in the war (Zhukov notwithstanding). However, there were surprising deficiencies lower down, and it is underestimated how often they only succeeded by profiting from their opponents' ineptitude. Their intelligence was often poor, explaining how they were surprised by the counter-attacks at Moscow and Stalingrad. This was not helped by Hitler's refusal to accept any information that countered his view of an inexorable surge towards victory.

Reuth removes any doubts about how the appalling fate of the Jews was decided. The idea that this was primarily an impromptu decision arising from the invasion of Poland and Russia, bringing several million more Jews into the Reich, cannot be sustained. From an early stage, Hitler made it clear that he intended to eliminate the Jews and constantly repeated this. Every step of the war, he insisted, was to be blamed on the Jews who, in his delusional belief, not only controlled Bolshevik Russia but capitalistic America (a paradox that never seems to strike anti-Semites). In this, the hieratics around him, to say nothing of

the German military and public, were complicit—the result a stain on human history for all time.

Considering the door-stopper books that have preceded his work, the author has adopted a concise approach, which leads to easier reading that some will welcome. However, it requires a degree of faith to accept findings that can appear superficial, if not thin. That Reuth's Hitler is a murderous fantasist and political opportunist consumed by the most extreme ideology of racial superiority in history is not a difficult conclusion to reach, but there is much more to it. For many, Reuth will have explained the deluded Fuhrer that fits with their view. Whether it can be allowed to pass without consideration of the deeper issues is something each reader will have to decide. What cannot be denied is that Reuth takes us back to an early Hitler: Alan Bullock's adventurer-conqueror, the most malevolent fanatic in history. Memories fade, but already the killing fields of Ukraine remind us that such myrmidons have only been hidden and are ever waiting to emerge.

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