

Hitler – an anti-capitalist revolutionary? The NSDAP leader never saw himself as right wing

This review by Stefan Beig was first published in “Jüdische Rundschau”
<https://juedischerundschau.de/article.2024-11.hitler-ein-antikapitalistischer-revolutionaer.html>

*To this day, Hitler is categorized as having had a right-wing extremist worldview. Now, decades after its original publication, a book that challenges the classification of Hitler’s political ideology is attracting growing interest and is available in a new edition. Rainer Zitelmann’s highly acclaimed study *Hitler. Selbstverständnis eines Revolutionärs* (in English: *Hitler’s National Socialism* <https://hitlers-national-socialism.com/>) reveals that Hitler did not identify as either right- or left-wing, but rather as an anti-capitalist revolutionary who had nothing but contempt for bourgeois and conservative interests. He placed great emphasis on social issues and equal opportunities and, as he got older, even expressed admiration for the Soviet planned economy.*

The book is a “longseller,” having sold successfully over many years. When it was first published by Berg-Verlag 37 years ago, it primarily appealed to historians. In recent years, it has garnered significant interest from an ever-wider readership outside the specialist world – both at home and abroad. The book is *Hitler. Selbstverständnis eines Revolutionärs* (in English: *Hitler’s National Socialism*) by Rainer Zitelmann, an in-depth exploration of Adolf Hitler’s inner thoughts and beliefs. Through meticulous analysis of Hitler’s speeches and writings, Zitelmann’s first doctoral thesis, which earned him a doctorate in history in 1986, has established itself as a definitive study on the worldview of the Nazi leader.

To date, several German-language editions of the work have been published. Interest in the work is also growing internationally: the study has already been published in English and has recently been released in Russian and Czech. Translations into Polish, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian are currently in progress and will follow soon.

A nuanced study with unexpected findings

Zitelmann’s book sets itself apart from other historians’ works in several respects. Firstly, it distinguishes very carefully between the Hitler of the 1920s, the 1930s, and the 1940s. Other authors tend to take a broad-brush approach to Hitler’s worldview from 1919 onward, as if the leader of the NSDAP had a single coherent worldview from the very beginning. This is not true. Rainer Zitelmann identifies several shifts and developments in Hitler’s way of thinking, right up to the last years of his life.

Secondly, Zitelmann’s assessment of Adolf Hitler is sober and objective, never passing judgement. For understandable reasons, many scholars still struggle to maintain such a neutral, non-judgmental stance when evaluating one of the greatest criminals in human history. However, the clear separation of factual analysis from personal opinion enhances the academic rigor of the book and avoids falling into the same trap as other Hitler biographers, many of whom draw hasty conclusions based on moral judgements. Furthermore, Zitelmann succeeds at all times in clearly detaching his study from his own (then left-wing) political convictions. (Today,

Zitelmann is a member of Germany's Free Democrat Party (FDP) and a supporter of classical liberalism.)

Thirdly, the findings of the study are quite surprising: they contest the traditional categorization of Adolf Hitler within the right-wing political spectrum. According to Zitelmann, Hitler was both a right-wing and left-wing extremist. As the leader of the NSDAP, he aimed to transcend this dichotomy, "not in the 'middle', however, but by a new extreme in which both were sublated." Moreover, Hitler considered himself a revolutionary and held social democrats and communists in higher regard than conservatives, the bourgeoisie, and even his fascist allies such as Benito Mussolini and Francisco Franco. Initially on the left-wing of the political spectrum, Hitler retained many of his convictions to the end.

Socialists and communists – the real opposing force to National Socialism?

According to the conventional assessment of Hitler as an extreme right-wing politician, the left would have been the true political opposition to National Socialism. At first glance, this viewpoint seems plausible, especially considering the widespread persecution of socialists and communists in the Third Reich. "In balance ... it is incontestable that the Communists and the Social Democrats had to bear the greater sacrifices," Zitelmann states. "While they were being tortured and murdered in the concentration camps, the right-wing bourgeois and the capitalist forces were still making good money in the Third Reich."

Adolf Hitler publicly attacked "Jewish Bolshevism" on several occasions, with some scholars identifying this animosity as the primary catalyst for his anti-Semitic beliefs. Furthermore, and this is undisputed, there is a fundamental contradiction – of which Hitler himself was well aware – between Hitler's nationalism and the internationalism of socialism.

For left-wing intellectuals like Max Horkheimer, the leading philosopher of the Frankfurt School, it was therefore clear: National Socialism was fascism, in line with the definition of fascism supplied by Georgi Dimitrov, General Secretary of the Communist International, who described it "as the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital."

This deeply ideological thesis persists to this day, despite the fact that it has long been debunked by historical research. Nonetheless, the left's reputation as the true antithesis to Hitlerism has often granted credibility to their analyses of National Socialism. However, Zitelmann, himself a Maoist in his youth, arrives at a completely different conclusion in his study. He concludes that Hitler had far more in common with the left than is generally assumed.

What did Hitler really think?

Rainer Zitelmann's analysis primarily draws on two of Hitler's books – *Mein Kampf* (1925) and his *Second Book* (1928), which was never published during his lifetime – along with countless speeches, newspaper articles, and recordings of his monologues and conversations.

As Zitelmann points out, Adolf Hitler's public speeches should be read with caution. Taking his words at face value can lead to contradictory conclusions, as the NSDAP leader said different things depending on the occasion, time, and audience. Hitler was also a skilled populist, tailoring his messages to different target groups and their respective interests. It made a big difference whether he was speaking to farmers, workers, or industrialists. "In this he was a master of demagogy and often succeeded

in deceiving both his supporters and opponents about his real views and intentions,” emphasizes Zitelmann.

Since Hitler believed that the masses were stupid, his speeches followed a simple “black/white” and “good/bad” pattern. Statements made in private, however, prove that his thinking on certain issues was far more nuanced. In his early speeches and articles, as well as in his two books, Hitler expressed his long-term domestic and foreign policy goals with astonishing candor, Zitelmann notes.

In order to distinguish between Hitler’s tactically motivated statements and those that should be taken seriously and at face value, Zitelmann subjects them to three “consistency tests.” He compares Hitler’s public statements with those that were not intended for the public, those made behind closed doors, recorded in minutes and diaries of close associates. This analysis reveals significant disparities. For instance, Hitler frequently criticized Mussolini and later the Spanish dictator Franco in private conversations – something he never did to the same extent in public. At the same time, Hitler displayed admiration for socialists and communists within his inner circle, while expressing nothing but contempt for the bourgeois and conservative parties.

The business party DVP (German Peoples Party), was disparaged by Hitler as a mere “milling about of ants,” with its members deemed to be “harmless, unimportant, politically without strength. It only vegetates.” Hitler’s verdict on the liberal Democratic Party was even more scathing. He called it “a stinking sore within the nation.” In contrast, he was far more positive toward the Social Democratic Party (SPD): “The racially most impeccable and best German people live together in Social Democracy.” He valued the SPD as a revolutionary party and hoped before the First World War that the Social Democrats in Austria would bring about a “weakening of the Habsburg regime I hated so much.” According to Hitler’s own notes, the fact that he turned away from the Social Democrats was due to the influence of the Jews within the party.

Moreover, Zitelmann distinguishes between the statements made by Hitler at specific times or to particular audiences, and those made consistently throughout his political career to all audiences. The former were often tactically motivated, while the latter can be taken to more closely reflect Hitler’s true convictions. For instance, in the late 1920s, Adolf Hitler appealed to rural voters with romanticized visions of agrarian life, but this strategy was short-lived and clearly motivated by tactical considerations.

Thirdly, Zitelmann considers the coherence of Hitler’s statements, specifically whether certain statements contradict the beliefs he expressed elsewhere. It is important to note that there were consistent themes in Hitler’s ideology, serving as foundational principles from which his other opinions can be derived. The most important of these fundamental axioms was Hitler’s concept of the “eternal fight” which for him was founded in social Darwinism: “I regard fighting as being the fate of all creatures.”

A revolutionary who unites nationalism and socialism

Zitelmann reconstructs and charts the evolution of Hitler’s world view with a large number of sometimes surprising quotes. According to his analysis, the leader of the NSDAP viewed himself as a revolutionary whose mission was to transform society. Hitler believed that this transformation could only be achieved with a fighting elite, a group he felt could only be found on the fringes of the political spectrum – among communists and nationalists, rather than among passive “hangers-on” from the bourgeois center. Hitler admired Communism because, as opposed to the bourgeois forces, it “fanatically” advocated a worldview. He wanted to carry out his revolution

with supporters from the communist and nationalist camp. In 1941, he recalled: “My party at the time consisted of ninety percent of people from the left. I could only use people who had fought.” (The percentage is likely to be an exaggeration.)

For Hitler, “nationalism” and “socialism” were identical: “Any truly national idea is social in the final analysis, that means whoever is prepared to commit himself to his nation so completely that he truly does not have any higher ideal than only the well-being of this, his nation, ... is a socialist.” And elsewhere: “The more fanatically national we are, the more we must take the welfare of the national community to heart, that means the more fanatically socialist we become.”

At the same time, Hitler “sharply rejected bourgeois nationalism because it identified egoistic class and profit interests with the interests of the nation” – and Hitler wanted to transcend these too. In Hitler’s own words: “socialism becomes nationalism, nationalism socialism ... We do not recognize pride of estate, just as little as pride of class. We know only one pride, namely to be the servants of a people.” Within this nation, Hitler wanted to bring about the equality sought by socialism: “Socialism can only exist within the framework of my nation” because “there can only be approximate equals within a national body in larger racial communities, but not outside of them.”

Hitler was always anti-capitalist, but only sporadically anti-Bolshevik

Contrary to long-held assumptions, social issues played a significant role in Hitler’s thinking. He was deeply concerned with promoting equality of opportunities and eliminating class and social distinctions. At the same time, Hitler was a staunch anti-capitalist, a belief that permeated his thinking consistently, rather than being a mere tactical maneuver as some Marxists and Social Democrats, for whom Hitler’s anti-capitalist rhetoric posed a problem, suggested in the 1920s. As Zitelmann demonstrates, anti-capitalism was a defining feature of Hitler’s thinking throughout. There is no contradiction here between Hitler in public and Hitler in private. Anti-capitalism was a constant thread, from the beginning of Hitler’s political career to the very end.

The same cannot be said of Hitler’s attitude toward “Jewish Bolshevism.” According to Zitelmann, Hitler believed in this ideology at the beginning of the 1920s; by the end of the 1920s his conviction had begun to waver; and in the 1940s he merely paid lip service to the thesis of Jewish Bolshevism, advocating it publicly without taking it seriously.

The historian Thomas Weber arrives at a similar conclusion in his 2016 book, *Wie Adolf Hitler zum Nazi wurde: Vom unpolitischen Soldaten zum Autor von Mein Kampf*. According to Weber, Hitler did not see Bolshevism as a distinct threat, but rather as a tool of Jewish capitalism.

Hitler only saw the Communists as rivals, yet the most dangerous opposition came from the right

Thus, anyone who interprets Hitler’s anti-Bolshevik statements as evidence of a reactionary, chauvinistic fascism is mistaken. The fact that Hitler persecuted the left more than the ranks of the bourgeois “has nothing to do with Hitler’s preference for the right, however – quite the opposite. He regarded the right-wing and bourgeois forces as being cowardly, weak, without energy and incapable of any resistance, whereas he assumed the left to have the brave, courageous, determined and therefore dangerous forces.” Hitler considered National Socialism to be a revolutionary movement in competition with the Communists. He therefore regarded the communists as his only serious adversaries.

This was possibly a mistaken assumption. As Zitelmann points out: “The only effective opposition to Hitler, in actual fact, represented by conservative and in part also monarchistic forces such as Ludwig Beck, Franz Halder, Hans Oster, Erwin von Witzleben, Carl Friedrich Goerdeler, Johannes Popitz, Count Peter Yorck von Wartenburg and Ulrich von Hassell, stood to his right.” The renowned journalist Sebastian Haffner expressed a similar view in 1979: “The only opposition which could really have become dangerous for Hitler came from the right,” he said. “From its vantage, Hitler was on the left. This makes us stop and think. Hitler can certainly not be so readily sorted into the extreme right of the political spectrum as many people are in the habit of doing.”

On 24 February 1945, as he faced up to the total and irreversible failure of the Third Reich, Hitler stated: “We liquidated the left-wing class fighters, but unfortunately we forgot in the meantime to also launch the blow against the right. That is our great sin of omission.” He was trying to find an explanation for his looming defeat. In fact, as Rainer Zitelmann emphasizes, it was Hitler’s adherence to ideological beliefs that prompted him not to act against the right-wing opponents he so despised, and not mere oversight.

Hitler’s state needed “living space in the East”

Hitler’s economic policies were heavily influenced by the renowned economist Thomas Robert Malthus, who suggested that population growth would outpace agricultural production, leading to potential famine, social unrest, and inflation. Hitler extended this theory to industrial production, predicting that demand for natural resources would surpass supply. In contrast to Malthus, Hitler believed that the solution to this problem lay in territorial expansion. He argued that if a state lacked sufficient resources within its borders, it should acquire them from sparsely populated neighboring states with abundant fertile land. This ideology fueled Hitler’s fixation on acquiring “living space in the east.”

With this in mind, on November 23, 1939, Hitler declared to his commanders-in-chief: “The increasing number of our people requires a larger living space. My objective is to establish a rational balance between population size and living space. This is where the struggle must commence. No nation can evade this challenge or else it must yield and gradually die out ... I have chosen a different path: adjusting living space to accommodate the population. One realization is important: the state makes sense only if it serves to preserve the essence of its people. In our case, we are talking about 82 million people ... The eternal challenge is to align the number of Germans with the available land.”

Incidentally, Malthus’ assumption was wrong. Growing populations can also be fed through increases in productivity and free trade. The fact that small states such as Switzerland and Singapore are today among the richest countries in the world speaks for itself. But Hitler had no interest in free trade and had a pessimistic outlook on the future of global trade. This sentiment was shared by many politicians of his era who, like Hitler, advocated self-sufficiency, but without prioritizing the expansion of their own territories.

Hitler’s attitude to private ownership of productive assets is somewhat more complicated. Although he dispensed with comprehensive nationalizations, his policies eroded the rights of owners by imposing strict state control over production and investment. Hitler believed that private property was permissible only when it served the “common good” rather than the self-interest of the entrepreneur. Owners were

required to align their actions with the state's objectives. In this way, everything remained subordinate to the state.

Adolf Hitler's admiration for the Soviet economy grew, particularly in the final years of his life. He received reports from the Eastern Front highlighting the substantial progress achieved as a result of Stalin's industrialization efforts. To his inner circle, Hitler explicitly praised the Soviet system of state planning and hinted that this should become a component of the post-war economy – entirely in line with his national socialism.

For a deeper insight into Hitler's political and economic perspectives, Zitelmann's book is highly recommended. In the intervening years, more and more research findings have been published, supporting and validating Zitelmann's original conclusions.