

## THE STATUS OF HITLER TODAY

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**Abstract:** By the end of the twentieth century, it can be said, Hitler was more alive and prominent than at the height of his power a half-century before. How did Hitler become this way? Isn't he dead? How can he become so prominent more than half a century after his death? The issue of Hitler today poses several historical problems that are deeply moral problems as well. In this work, however, I intend to concentrate primarily on their historical dimension. In light of Hitler's astonishing rise in modern historical consciousness, this leads to the inevitable question: Have we not granted to Hitler a far greater power over us than ever he had when he was alive and commanding his *Wehrmacht* divisions at the farthest extent of his conquests?.

**Keywords:** Hitler, nazism, World War Two, culture, present time..

When the news flashed to the world at 10:26 p.m. on May 1, 1945, that the Führer was dead, it was believed that the long nightmare of Hitler was over. Within a week, the German armies surrendered unconditionally on every front. Soon the news was also leaked to the world of the manner of his death: with a cyanide capsule between his teeth, and a pistol in his mouth. The man did not even die like a man; but rather, as one German officer said, "like a mad dog." His propaganda minister's boast that in a hundred years they would be making movies of his heroic death in the bunker was met by the whole world with scornful laughter. Hitler, it was universally believed, was the most forgettable man in history. There remained only the trial of his criminal co-conspirators, and the case of Hitler would be closed for all time, of little interest to anyone but historians in dusty archives. For the next fifteen years or so, Hitler was effectively consigned to oblivion. German soldiers threw their decorations into the sea.

Hitler's house at Obersalzberg was bulldozed away in 1955. The massive towers of Hitler's stadium for the Nuremberg rallies were demolished. The denazification program of the occupying powers set out to insure that all Nazi sympathizers were eliminated from public life. Every vestige of Hitler and his Third Reich was systematically obliterated.

After the war, the world went about accomplishing the dreams that predated Hitler. The German people rose from the rubble to replace, under Konrad Adenauer, the republic that had failed at Weimar. The United Nations was formed to overcome the deficiencies of Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations. The world's financiers set out to cure the evils that had brought on the Great Depression by entering into a series of accords that transformed the international monetary system and the world economy. The nineteenth-century war between socialism and capitalism, only briefly interrupted by Hitler, assumed center-stage again in the form of the Cold War, fought by saber-rattling, intelligence agencies, and political fronts; in minor wars and skirmishes; and with such a massive rearming, stockpiling of weapons of mass destruction, and threats of massive retaliation that made Hitler seem small fish, indeed.

And so the world went about rebuilding after the war with no more thought of Hitler than if all his destruction had been caused by a natural catastrophe—a hurricane, tsunami, tornado, or earthquake. Hitler had only interrupted the history of the world; he had not changed it. For fifteen or twenty years, Hitler was considered dead, gone, out of the picture, irrelevant, forgotten—of far less interest or importance than Napoleon and the French revolution that had preceded him by more than a century.

But sometime between the 1960s and the 1990s, something very strange began to happen. The screws on Hitler's coffin began to turn, and his spectral image began to crawl out to haunt us again. By the end of the twentieth century, it can be said, he was more alive and prominent than at the height of his power a half-century before.

If one judges by the number of newspaper articles about him, for example, Hitler receives far more coverage than any of the great leaders who defeated him. A search of the New York Times online archives for the five-year period from January 1, 1996 (the first year online) through December 31, 2000, reveals that there are substantially more articles containing Hitler's name than the heroes who defeated him. Hitler is mentioned 2,350 times compared to Franklin Roosevelt's 1,573; Eisenhower's 1,386, and Stalin's 1,043. Winston Churchill receives a mere 484 mentions, and DeGaulle only 341.

A far more accurate indication of Hitler's influence, however, is how many more mentions he receives fifty years after his death than even contemporary world leaders. Although Bill Clinton (24,008), George Bush (9,868), and Al Gore (8,917), naturally receive much more coverage in the New York Times than Hitler, it may be surprising to see how much more coverage Hitler receives than other current American and world leaders. Compare the number of articles mentioning Hitler (2,350) with the number of articles mentioning the following major newsmakers: [Yasir] Arafat (2,337); [Benjamin] Netanyahu (2,190); Saddam Hussein (2,048); [Ehud] Barak (2,000); Janet Reno (1,997); Trent Lott (1,924); [Pope] John Paul II (1,545); [British Prime Minister] Tony Blair (1,604); [Russian Premier Vladimir] Putin (872); and [French President Jacques] Chirac (880). Hitler even receives three times more coverage than the total for both the present German chancellor, Gerhard Schroeder (45), and his predecessor, Helmut Kohl (672), combined. Hitler's prominence in the news more than half a century after his death, in comparison with current newsmakers, is astonishing. It seems that, though dead, he is more present than the living actors on the stage of history.

No less astonishing, it seems likely that the name of Adolf Hitler has become more universally known by every school child around the world than that of any other non-religious leader in world history. Even his face, no matter how stylized—with the short, black moustache

and lock of hair—is probably more instantly recognized than any other comparable figure in human history. Even his birthday—4/20—is known by every high school student. Not are these known, but I suspect that everyone, even the young, can identify who he was historically: the mad German dictator who led the Nazis, caused the Holocaust of the Jews, and started the Second World War. Because of this, Ian Kershaw, Hitler's most recent biographer, has been moved to ask: "Has this been Hitler's century?"

"Certainly, [Kershaw writes], no other individual has stamped a more profound imprint on it than Adolf Hitler. Other dictators...have engaged in wars of conquest, held subjugated peoples in thrall, presided over the perpetration of immeasurable inhumanity and left their mark on the character of the twentieth century. But the rule of none of them has seared people's consciousness beyond their own countries the world over, like the rule of Adolf Hitler has done"<sup>1</sup>.

Kershaw notes that there have been many other political leaders who have "symbolized the positive values of the century, have epitomized belief in humanity, hope for the future," such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy and Nelson Mandela. But, observes Kershaw, "Hitler's mark on the century has been deeper than each of them."

Kershaw is recording a strange development: that in the closing years of the second millennium a remarkable turnabout occurred. Evil now trumps good in historical memory; the most evil leader has come to overshadow all the good ones of recent history, and infamy has eclipsed bona fide fame. Saul Friedlaender writes what that Hitler has brought about is an "inversion of signs"<sup>2</sup>. It is a simple fact, as commentators have noted, that it is Hitler, and not those who defeated him, nor any of the others who fought or died for the good causes, who excites the most interest and fascination both among scholars and the public. As the late Robert G. L. Waite writes, "It seems likely that more will be written about Adolf Hitler than about anyone else in history with the possible exception of Jesus Christ"<sup>3</sup>. Thus Hitler has moved, in the last decades of the twentieth century, from the most forgettable interruption in history, to become the central figure of modern history, what Kershaw calls the "paradigm for the twentieth century."

Hitler has not only achieved what is probably the greatest name-recognition in the modern world, he has also achieved much more: his name has become associated with power. Once men did not act until the name of God, or the names of the gods—or at least the names of their saints and heroes—were invoked. But recently it has come to be the case that few actions are taken, and few causes embarked on, until Hitler's name has been invoked. Ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism, for example, Hitler has become the highest—and, perhaps, the only—reason to go to war. Whether they are enemies as disparate as Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Milosovic, it has become necessary to first identify their names with Hitler before the bombs could drop or the troops move. For Hitler seems to have acquired the living power to take new shapes and inhabit new bodies, and he must first be identified with whatever must be fought, and destroyed in whomever he becomes incarnated. There may never be another Franklin Roosevelt or Winston Churchill seems to be the judgment of the world, but there will be many more Hitlers.

The power of Hitler has grown to extend far more into the political life of the West than simply the issues of war and peace. An American politician suggests in a book that Americans could have saved themselves the tremendous burden of forty years of Cold War if the United States had encouraged Hitler to fight Stalin instead of declaring war on us—and he is ipso facto disqualified in the minds of millions from holding office<sup>4</sup>.

The governor of a small province in Austria, of no greater importance than a county commissioner, notes the facts that many of Austria's highly regarded employment policies were put into place under Hitler, and that not all the Austrian soldiers drafted for World War II were criminals—and the European Union imposes harsh international sanctions on the entire nation<sup>5</sup>.

On a smaller scale, the slightest mention of Hitler's name is sufficient to put into motion the most powerful forces of society against solitary individuals in even the most seemingly irrelevant situations. For example, Marge Schott, the owner of the Cincinnati Reds, casually quips that maybe Hitler was good for the people in the beginning but became bad later. (Incidentally, this is a position taken by quite a number of reputable scholars, such as

Joachim Fest, who argue that if Hitler had died in 1938, he would have gone down in history as “the greatest of German statesmen”<sup>6</sup>. Even Winston Churchill said of Hitler in 1937: “If our country were defeated I hope we should find a champion as indomitable to restore our courage and lead us back to our place among nations”<sup>7</sup>. Nonetheless, a furor breaks out forcing Schott to resign and give up the team<sup>8</sup>, causing Russell Baker to note the incongruity in a column entitled, “Baseball for Hitler”<sup>9</sup>. In 2000, the mere mention of Hitler's name in connection with a member of the New York City board of education was sufficient to have a columnist suspended from his newspaper<sup>10</sup>.

Hitler's name is sufficient to desecrate even the most solemn ritual. An American president undertakes to celebrate the anniversary of the battle of Normandy by honoring the dead of both sides, as Abraham Lincoln taught us to do, and as we do at Gettysburg every year—and demonstrations erupt, filled with signs carrying Hitler's name<sup>11</sup>.

But even more astonishing than the recognition factor of Hitler's name and face is the transformation of an ancient and honorable symbol into his personal sign. The fear of Hitler's swastika is phenomenal. A sixty foot swastika invisible on the ground, but discovered in an aerial photograph, is cut into the stalks of a farmer's cornfield in New Jersey—and it results in a series of stories in the *New York Times*<sup>12</sup>. In Germany, trees planted in the 1930s in the form of a swastika, invisible from the ground and long forgotten, are noticed by a passing airplane sixty years later, and it becomes a matter for the Bundestag. Thus, Hitler's swastika has the power, unlike any other graffiti, to make news and involve governmental action, even half a century after his death. Graffiti is everywhere, and if every instance of it were noted in the newspapers, there would be room for nothing else. But let the graffiti be a swastika, and it often makes headlines. Graffiti painted on the walls of Columbine high school after the shootings went unmentioned until the appearance of a swastika in the restroom made national news<sup>13</sup>. If the graffiti is a swastika, the trial of the most petty vandalism makes the *New York Times*<sup>14</sup>. School children are taught that Hitler is the most important person who ever lived. Required courses are instituted by schools to teach every new generation about his unique crimes, admonishing them never to forget him. Children are taught that his symbol,

the swastika, is the most forbidden—and, therefore, the most powerful and dangerous—symbol in the world. Tens of thousands are bussed to museums of ghoulish horror to edify them with the messages: “Hitler must never be forgotten”, and “No more Hitlers”; all guaranteeing that Hitler will always be in their consciousness.

Monuments to his evil dot the most prominent places of almost every major city in the world. The media pound the message into the public’s mind every day: “Hitler is not like other men who live and die; he is all around us. Beware! He might erupt at any moment!” And, sure enough, people as disparate as Jorg Haider in Austria, Pym Fortuyn in the Netherlands, Jacques LePen in France, and Patrick J. Buchanan in the United States, are routinely portrayed as the political reincarnations of Hitler’s spirit, along with Slobadan Milosovic and Saddam Hussein.

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How did Hitler become this way? Isn’t he dead? How can he become so prominent more than half a century after his death? One answer is that, in a secularized world, Hitler has become the one, absolute, and ultimate symbol of evil. He has become as omnipresent in the imagination as evil is omnipresent in life. Wherever evil is encountered, it is as though there is always a sign beside it with Hitler’s name on it. He has thus achieved a unique place in the mind of the world; not only can he not be forgotten, we cannot rid him from our consciousness. He has become one of the two poles of our existence; if “the good” is the rock on which we seek to build our lives, Hitler is the dark sea that constantly threatens to rise and inundate us.

The issue of Hitler today poses several historical problems that are deeply moral problems as well. In this work, however, I intend to concentrate primarily on their historical dimension. For I wish to argue that the present place of Hitler in our minds and psyches, in public discourse, and in decision-making, does not arise from the moral nature of the universe. Of all the human beings who ever lived, Hitler may be the least likely to ever deserve a place in our moral universe. He is there purely and completely because, as a matter of history since the Second World War, we have built a place for him there, just as he predicted we would.

At the historical level there are two major problems. First, by making Hitler the ultimate symbol of evil, we have guaranteed him a permanent place in the human psyche. If Hitler is the greatest source of evil we can conceive, he becomes ipso facto the greatest danger to our highest hopes and dreams. Second, by enshrining him as the source of evil, we make Hitler the symbol of all the temptations into which the nations of the world might fall. In other words, since World War II, we have channeled our historical existence into an either/or position of everything we believe ourselves to be versus Hitler.

In light of Hitler’s astonishing rise in modern historical consciousness, this leads to the inevitable question: Have we not granted to Hitler a far greater power over us than ever he had when he was alive and commanding his Wehrmacht divisions at the farthest extent of his conquests? At least, when he was alive, he barely entered our minds; he was just another monster to rid the world of. The soldiers who fought him were afraid of his bullets and his bombs, but that ridiculous dictator with the Charlie Chaplin moustache never haunted their dreams; he himself did not appear in their nightmares. On the contrary, they were quite convinced that if they ever came upon him, he would be no more fearful than the little professor pulling the levers behind the Wizard of Oz. But is that the case today? When we hear that the Columbine shootings were planned for 4/20, did we not immediately remember that this was Hitler’s birthday? And did that fact not engender in us a far more grisly fear than the shootings themselves? Why are we so afraid that Hitler might be still alive and lurking under the surface of life, threatening to erupt into our presence at any moment? Must we think of Hitler every time a madman shoots up a MacDonalds? This is the first historical problem of Hitler: how has this man, so infinitely forgettable and dead, come to be seen as present in events occurring half a century after his death? The second historical problem posed by the permanent presence of Hitler in our minds is that it constitutes a historical vindication of Hitler and what I believe to be the fundamental basis of his personal Weltanschauung. He once said, “For me, there are only two possibilities: to succeed with my plans entirely, or to fail. If I succeed, I will be one of the greatest men in history—if I fail, I will be condemned, rejected, and damned.”<sup>15</sup> Either one, it appears, was more preferable to him than being forgotten.

Few men have ever predicted such extreme possibilities for themselves and accomplished both of them. He wanted to become the most powerful, feared, and dreaded man in the world, and he achieved that for a short time. But his plans also called for conquering the whole world and establishing his domination for a thousand years. When that failed to materialize, he knew enough about human nature to know we would allow him to achieve his other goal: to become the most condemned, most rejected, most damned man in human history—and there to reign over the kingdom of evil in the human heart for a thousand years. “Everything that I say or do is history,”<sup>16</sup> he once insisted. It may be galling to admit it—and even more galling to recall that he intended the gall—but that may have become one of the truest statements he ever made.

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This leads to a lot of questions: How did this ugly little man ever find the power to worm his way into foreign policy decisions, prominence in the newspapers, and the minds of children fifty years after his death? How did he achieve such a place in history? How did this postcard painter from the slums of Vienna enter so completely into our consciousness, and continue to grow there, like a cancer, even half a century after his death, until he is part of everyday discourse? These questions are weighty enough. But let us not stop there; let us continue to ask questions until we find one that unlocks a cure for this affliction.

Why is it that we cannot mention his name in public—except as an epithet—without trepidation? What is the cause of the fear that this man can still inspire in us? Why is it that his life and career cannot be relegated to history and discussed coolly and rationally like the life of any other man? Why does not the fear of this man dissipate, now that he is long dead? None of the other monsters of history—Nero, Attila the Hun, the Borgias, Napoleon, or even the recent ones, such as Stalin or Mao (each of whom tortured and murdered many more people than Hitler)—has ever afflicted our minds, nor achieved a place in historical consciousness, similar to Hitler. Why, then, does not Hitler just die, and crawl into the pages of dusty history books like all the others, where no one but a few longhaired students and white-haired scholars will ever run across his name? What keeps Hitler so alive to us?

Phrased this way, an answer to these questions suggests itself. It is at once both simple and unsettling: Perhaps Hitler intended it to be that way. Like Herostratus, the young man in ancient Greece who deliberately burned down the Temple of Diana and, when asked why, replied, “I want to be remembered” (and who, for that reason, is still remembered), Hitler planned his entire life to affect history. In other words, Hitler may have deliberately set out to effect his own remembrance. His entire career and his personal *Weltanschauung* may have been based on this one sole goal, and on his one insight into history that made him confident that he could achieve it.

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Once a friend asked Hitler what, in *Mein Kampf*, was the most revealing statement he made about himself. Without hesitation he replied, “A short sentence at the very beginning of the book in which I say that as a youth I learned the meaning of history”<sup>17</sup>. The sentence to which he refers occurs on page 10 of *Mein Kampf*, where Hitler is summarizing the most important things he learned by the age of sixteen. There Hitler wrote, emphasizing the words, “I learned to understand and grasp the meaning of history”.

That statement has been considered by almost all historians of Hitler to be a pompous, arrogant, and self-inflating—not to mention, vacuous—statement. They claim that it is just plain silly of Hitler to attribute such an understanding to himself as a teenager. Philosophers and historians, they argue, have debated the meaning of history for twenty-five hundred years, ever since Herodotus, and still not settled on its meaning.

Nevertheless, when we consider the effect that Hitler had on history, together with his continuing presence in our consciousness long after his death, the evidence suggests two things that, however unpleasant, we ought to investigate further: 1) perhaps he did understand something about history; and 2) perhaps this is the most revealing thing he ever disclosed about himself. Let us, therefore, consider Hitler's claim that very early in life he came to understand the “meaning of history”; and, further, that it was the most important thing he ever said about himself. What, then, was his meaning of history? Four pages later in *Mein Kampf*, he defines exactly what he means by it.

But if I were to simply quote at this point the definition he writes there, it might appear as arrogant, pompous, and empty as the statement already quoted. So, let me first create a background for the statement he will offer. I intend to imaginatively recreate the thought process that may have taken place in Hitler's mind as a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old boy, which led to his belief that he had mastered the meaning of history by the age of sixteen. Let us, therefore, take our minds back to the beginning of the century, to the years, say, 1902 or 1903, and imagine a high school classroom in Linz, Austria, where a teacher is lecturing on history to twenty or thirty bored teenagers.

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When philosophers or historians talk about the "meaning of history," what do they mean? They usually mean a professor sitting in an armchair imagining that there is some pattern to historical events—some purpose, direction, or goal toward which they are heading. Or, sometimes they mean a teacher standing behind a lectern explaining the differences among a dozen arid concepts of history (each conceived by some other professor sitting in an armchair), and showing the flaws in each theory to rows of students who will leave class convinced that "history is bunk".

But what if, just what if, an exceptionally bright, intelligent, and precocious lad of fourteen or fifteen, none too conventional, and rebellious to boot, while listening to such a lecture, chanced upon another idea. It would not be too difficult for such a youngster to do so; all he would have to do is to listen to the form and not the content of the teacher's words.

He might reason like this: "If someone—anyone—has to imagine whether there is a pattern to historical events, then perhaps there isn't any." "Perhaps", the boy might reason further, "there is no purpose, direction or goal, either".

Most normal kids would stop there, content with the conclusion that, after all, history is bunk—nothing more than a bunch of stories, though some are quite interesting. They might even go on to guess the point of it all, the conclusion the high school teacher is trying to lead all of them to see for themselves: "Well, my life is a story, so I guess I'm part of history, too".

But if the lad were exceptionally bored, and used to taking long flights of fancy and staring deeply into the emptiness of his own soul (an essential for a mystical experience, according to the most highly regarded mystics), he might not stop at such a natural and comfortable conclusion. He might go on to wonder a bit further about history. He might, for example, ask: what kind of stories are part of history and what are not? "There is a 'story' to everything that happens," he might reason, "but most are forgotten, like what I ate for breakfast yesterday, or who won the game of cowboys and Indians we played last week. All of that will dissolve in our memories, soon to be forgotten—like this boring lecture I'm sitting through—never to be thought of again."

"So," he begins to ponder, "what, then, is history?"

"Hmm, an interesting thought," he might say to himself.

"I am not hearing a word of what the teacher in the front of the room is saying, but I am looking straight at him, as though seeing him for the first time, and wondering, why does the state pay this man to be here, anyway?" As the boy is staring at his teacher, the question becomes even more insistent: "What, indeed, is history?"

"Let's see," he says to himself. It's not the memory of everything that has ever happened; it's only the memory of the big things and the important people: Socrates, Pericles, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, William the Conqueror, Pope Innocent III, Martin Luther, Wallenstein, Frederick the Great, and, of course, the Hapsburgs and the Hohenzollerns. But what about all the other people, the little people who just live their lives? They never make it into history books; they're forgotten". His mind wanders through his own experience: "I think of that beautiful house on Lindermannstrasse that's a hundred years old. The man who built that really did something, but I have no idea who he was. He never made it into the history books, though what he did was important, at least to the people who live in it, or perhaps to the people who walk down that street and see it, like me. But I don't know who he was, and the people who live there now probably don't know, either—and don't care. Whoever he was, history swallowed him up. We don't read about him in the history books. But, nonetheless, he left this

monument without a name on it. Perhaps he built it only for himself and didn't care if anyone after knew his name. I wonder how many others left monuments like that—nameless monuments to personal selfishness.

"I think I'll look at buildings more closely [...] And then there are all the people who never nothing left anything to be remembered by [...] I wonder if I'll ever be remembered; I wonder if any of us will. [...] I look at the students around me now; they're all giving rapt attention to the story the teacher is telling. They think they are part of history.

'They are nothing. And so am I. None of us will be remembered a hundred years from now, and we probably won't leave anything to even show we were here. Perhaps we little people are only the bearers of the historical memory of others—for the few who make it into history books. Maybe that's all history is, and that's all we are: carriers of other people's memory through time.

"This would make sense if history were only the memory of the good things. But it isn't; Attila the Hun wasn't good, and neither was the Black Death, nor the siege of Vienna, nor Napoleon (maybe for the French—No, not even that: remember the Russian campaign. No, Napoleon wasn't good for them, either; and certainly not for us Austrians). But we have to learn about all these horrible things anyway.

"In fact, now that I think about it, why do we learn about any of these things? What good is it to learn about the death of Saint Sebastian, the persecution of the early Christians, Saint Bartholomew's Massacre, the Thirty Years War, or four-hundred-and-fifty-thousand Frenchmen who froze to death on their way back from Russia?

"Maybe there's nothing good about history at all. There is no meaning, purpose, direction, or goal. Maybe there's no point to it, either; and no point in learning it. Maybe it's just the passing on of a meaningless jumble to the carriers of human memory. Whoever had the biggest effects gets remembered. Maybe that's all it is. But wait! Maybe that's the whole point. History is nothing but effects. Maybe all of life is nothing but effects, and history is only the memory of the biggest effects people cause. I never thought of life that way before, but now that I look around, it makes sense.

"Look at Frieda over there. She thinks she likes me and is always trying to get my attention. She is only trying to have an effect on me. Or Hermann; he thinks he's a bully, and loves to see the look of fear in the eyes of the smaller boys—he loves the effects he causes. Or Peter, he's always telling jokes. He only does it to cause people to laugh and to like him. Again, only effects. Or Ludwig, he thinks he's so smart, always trying to impress us. Just effects. Frieda, Hermann, Peter, and Ludwig will be forgotten by history. But right now, in their own petty way, they are emulating what the important people of history do. They are trying to affect other people so that someone will notice them and they will be remembered, if only while they are alive.

"Hey! Maybe that's a universal principle: all of human life is nothing but everybody trying to have effects on everybody else. It's nothing but creating an effect, and history is nothing people learning how to have effects on each other from those who had the biggest effects.

"Now, history is beginning to make sense. It's a far deeper thought than what the Socialists and Marxists say. They argue that history is about nothing but economics, and the struggle between capital and labor for the products—the effects—of labor. The capitalists say that they produce the effects; socialists say that labor creates the effects. All they are arguing about is who creates the effects! Gee, that makes politics a lot more interesting.

"You know, that is all art is about, too. An artist creates art for the sole purpose of causing an effect, whether he's a writer, a poet, a sculptor, or a painter—which is what I want to be. If your work creates a lot of effects on people, you're a great artist. Wow! That makes sense.

"Maybe love is only cause and effect, too. Every man and woman wants nothing more than to find a mate upon whom they can cause an effect. And when they find someone, *Voilà!* (I'm surprised I remember anything from French class), look at the effects they cause: children. Then the parents get to work to cause effects through their children—like my father, who wants me to become a civil servant. By the age of five or six, parents call in the state to take over and send us to school to work more effects on us. It's all one big circle, everyone trying to have an effect on everyone else, with the whole

thing organized to keep the effects of the big people remembered and passed down.

“Maybe, life is nothing but a memory machine designed to press out memories on as many people as it can. Those who are great in history are those who impress themselves on the greatest number of people and, conversely, whoever is remembered by the greatest number of people is great. Yeah, that's it: life is all about pressing memories on as many people as possible. Those with the biggest memory machines make history; those don't, well, they don't exist at all.

“Maybe that's what religion is about, too. I don't believe in God, or any of that life-after-death crap. There is no immortality. But maybe there is a way to prolong your existence after death by continuing to exist in memory. All one has to do is cause big effects. That's funny: just think of all those priests and monks down through the centuries doing nothing but devoting their lives to keeping the memory of one executed criminal alive! It's hilarious—what an incredible put-on!

“You know? Maybe it all makes sense. There may not be any purpose or goal to history—or to life, for that matter—but it does give me something to think about for my goal in life. The important thing is to cause effects that people will remember. My life is crap, but if I can get people to read about it in history books for a couple of centuries—now that's something!

“What a wonderful thought! Life is like a game, and history is a big prank, like when somebody carries a big scythe, dresses up in a black cloak, and then knocks on somebody's door in the middle of the night. They won't forget that for a long time! Hey, this is a great idea! In a meaningless world, it gives some zest to life. If life is no more than the effects one causes, then one only lives through effects [...] He who creates the biggest effects lives! and the maker of effects gets remembered and lives on [...] (And, now that I think about it, whoever makes the biggest effects does pretty well in this life, too, at least most of the time [...]) Yes, that is what history is: if you want to be somebody, you've got to cause big effects.

“It's brilliant! And it's easy, too [...] All I have to do is to empty myself of all the nonsense we learn in school, church, and every place else—and start living! [...] That should be pretty easy; I feel pretty empty now anyway [...] But I have got to start finding out about how to do that [...]

They don't teach that in school—they teach us how to bow down to the people who make the big effects [...] But I can find it on my own: how to make bigger effects than anyone else in history [...] You can do anything if you really want to”.

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A few pages later in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler states that this was exactly what he decided that history is: “To 'learn' history,” he writes, “is to seek and find the forces which are the causes of those effects which we subsequently perceive as historical facts”<sup>18</sup>.

These words because help to understand why, on the one hand, Hitler was such an absolutely unmemorable human being, and on the other hand, how has entered so completely into the consciousness of the world half a century after his death. As a teenager, Adolf Hitler became a dedicated disciple of the doctrine that perception is everything. His goal was now clear: to seek and find the forces that would subsequently be perceived as history. He entered upon the quest enthusiastically and never once looked back. A few pages later in *Mein Kampf*, he writes:

“The habit of historical thinking which I thus learned in school has never left me in the intervening years. To an ever-increasing extent world history became for me an inexhaustible source of understanding for the historical events of the present. I do not want to 'learn' it, I want it to instruct me”<sup>19</sup>.

As Sebastian Hafner writes of Hitler's life, “Everything that matters in it blends with history, is history.” This is exactly what Hitler wanted historians to say. Hitler set out to make history as he understood it—history as effects. It did not matter what those effects were; they just had to be big enough to be remembered. He knew that people love big effects, and will talk about them for a thousand years. Whether he won a “Thousand Year Reich” or killed six million Jews, the effect was the same: he would be remembered, and he would live on in the only way possible in an utterly meaningless world. “I have no fear of annihilation,” he said. “Cities will become heaps of ruins. Noble monuments [...] disappear forever [...] But I am not afraid of this”<sup>20</sup>. For “I know how to keep my hold on people long after I have passed on. [...] My life shall not end in the mere form of death. It will, on the contrary, begin then”<sup>21</sup>.

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The first historical problem is, therefore, insofar as Hitler is remembered, is not his horrible evil, nor whether he succeeded at his tangible goals, but whether his remembrance serves to vindicate his idea of history?

To comprehend Hitler's idea of history, writes Konrad Heiden, one must understand two principles. The first is that, for Hitler, "everything serves as a means to an end;" and the second is that, "The end is [his own] permanence and greatness." What does Hitler mean by his own "permanence and greatness"? Heiden lets Hitler explain: "There is nothing in all the cultural monuments," says Hitler, "that does not owe its existence to [...] political intention. Rome and Hellas—no cultural state has arisen except through [...] the will to obtain monuments"<sup>22</sup>.

The will to obtain monuments, therefore, becomes the sum and substance of Hitler's entire *Weltanschauung* and the only test Hitler recognized for its vindication.

"I could not imagine the victory of our philosophy of life", Hitler insisted, "otherwise than embodied in monuments which outlast the times". Heiden elucidates:

Hitler dreams of his own giant monuments in the future. 'When a people is extinguished and men are silent, the stones will speak'—of the great deceased [...] 'Everything I say or do belongs to history,' he said at a time when the great red posters with his name attracted at most a thousand people to a beer hall.

For basically everything that he said or did was calculated only to imprint his infinitely enlarged imprint on the present, to multiply himself in his own creation, and to disappear as a man behind his legend"<sup>23</sup>.

"I have to gain immortality", he said, "even if the whole German nation perishes in the process"<sup>24</sup>. Heiden elucidates: "For basically everything that he said or did was calculated to imprint his infinitely enlarged image on the present, to multiply himself in his creation, and to disappear behind his legend"<sup>25</sup>. Thus Hitler, half a century after his death, has been permitted to achieve his goal, not in stone monuments, but in a manner even more difficult to accomplish—in permanent, living memory. Robert Payne writes: "Once Hitler said he lived by some verses

he found in the Scandinavian Eddas. The verses read: 'All things pass away but death and the glory of deeds'<sup>26</sup>. But Hitler knew that infamy lives on, too, perhaps more surely than the "glory of deeds—it's all a matter of how one looks at history. The name of Attila the Hun and his title, "the Scourge of God," are still known to every school child, while the name of the peaceful man who stopped him at the gates of Rome is forgotten. Has Hitler's view of history won for him what he wanted? The last words of Alan Bullock's classic biography of Hitler are, "'Si monumentum requiris, circumspice'—'If you seek his monument, look around'"<sup>27</sup>. Hitler is even more present to modern consciousness than when he was alive.

\* \* \*

But the story does not end there. It merely gives rise to two more questions that any detective worth his salt would find the answer to before he gathered everyone in the parlor to explain his solution to the mystery. The first question, chronologically, is the question of how he planned to get the power to commit the crimes for which he would be remembered. What principle was it that this high school dropout, this denizen of the Viennese slums, learned about history, that enabled him to immigrate to a foreign land, subdue it, and almost conquer the world?

Of course, he had to get power first. But how did he do that? He did not get power just by wishing for it; nor was power thrust upon him. He struggled fourteen years to build up the largest, best organized, mass movement in European history. What was his method? Did he learn this from history, too? To date, no one seems to know. To one historian, he was simply "a tremendous force of energy that shattered all existing standards"<sup>28</sup>.

To another, "He erupted like a force of nature, a tornado, or a hurricane, destroying all in his path, and even now, though the evidence of his destructive fury lies all around us, it seems unbelievable that a single man could wreak such havoc"<sup>29</sup>. The historians record that he appeared and attracted people to himself unlike any other politician in modern memory. But they cannot explain his power of attraction, his principles of organization, nor his uncanny ability to understand the forces that make history. He is a mystery. "History records no phenomenon like him," writes his foremost biographer, Joachim Fest<sup>30</sup>.

The second historical question also remains unanswered, and it is even more difficult and unsettling. How is it that we, both the historians and, indeed, all of us, have collaborated in Hitler's greatest crime—by which I mean the continuing presence that this evil man still has in modern consciousness and his seizure of the post-Second World War historical imagination? The corollary to this question is: in allowing Hitler to become so prominent in our consciousness, are we not, criminally, vindicating his idea of history—his own personal *Weltanschauung*?

Historians argue over hundreds of theories to explain him, unable to reach any convincing conclusion or to arrive at a consensus, while grinning specter of Hitler laughs at them from Hell, saying, "Don't you understand? My idea of history was right. I, and I alone, grasped the meaning of history, and the memory of me will last to the end of time." Does anyone doubt that it will? We think that we are getting even with Hitler for all his evil by keeping his memory alive so that we can damn him forever. But then the jarring thought hits: perhaps that is precisely what he wanted all along.

While, chronologically, this question comes second, I venture to suggest that we cannot understand how Hitler seized control of the mass mind in Germany while he was alive until we understand how he controls the mass mind and historical memory of our own time, fifty years after his death. Upon reflection, the objective reader will perhaps agree that this is an even more astonishing phenomenon than the stupendous power he attained during his lifetime. If we are going to think backward and solve these mysteries, we must think backward from the present. The formula for every detective story is "the corpse on page one". Today, Adolf Hitler is the corpse on page one; he awaits the detective who will unravel his secret.

I suggest that we look to what the historians have done with Hitler since 1945 for the clues that will unravel the mystery of why Hitler has been able to dominate the historical imagination so completely by the end of the century. For it is they, more than anyone else, who have fallen into the trap he laid for them, and thereby allowed his posthumous influence to continue. Hermann Göring provided the first clue when he boasted of the mystery hidden from historians in Hitler's rise to power: "In later times the

historians will not know how to depict it. For the first time in world history the historians will conclude: that did not happen by the normal process"<sup>31</sup>.

Göring's boast has proved prescient, suggesting that the secret of Hitler's rise to power, known to Göring and thousands of other Nazis, is hidden only by the methods of current historians. As the first detective, the Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, long ago advised: "In investigations such as we are now pursuing, it should not be so much asked 'what has occurred,' as 'what has occurred that has never occurred before'"<sup>32</sup>. I suggest, therefore, that an analysis of the egregious errors of Hitler's historians will provide us with the necessary clues to solve the first historical mystery: how this so completely forgettable man ever came to power in the first place.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kershaw, Ian, *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris*. New York and London, W.W. Norton, 1998, xix.

<sup>2</sup> Friedlaender, Saul, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*. New York, Harper & Row, 1982, 107.

<sup>3</sup> Waite, Robert G. L., *Adolf Hitler, The Psychopathic God*. New York, Basic Books, 1977, ix.

<sup>4</sup> See *The New York Times*. Clines, Francis X., "Buchanan's Views on Hitler Create a Reform Party Stir". 21 September 1999; Lane, Christopher; Schwarz, Benjamin, "A Fair Reading of History", 30 September 1999; "Excerpts from Buchanan's New Volume", 25 September 1999 and Judis, John B., "The Buchanan Doctrine". 3 October 1999.

<sup>5</sup> See Friedman, Thomas L., "Liar's Poker, Intercontinental Style". *The New York Times*, 8 February 2000; Wistrich, Robert S., "Haider and His Critics". *Commentary*, April 2000; Cohen, Roger, "A Haider in Their Future". *The New York Times Magazine*, 30 April 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Fest, Joachim, *Hitler*. New York, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by John Lukacs in *The Duel 10 May-31 July 1940: The Eighty-Day Struggle Between Churchill and Hitler*. New York, Ticknor & Fields, 1990, 40; citing *The Evening Standard* (London), 17 September 1937.

<sup>8</sup> See Chass, Murray, "Schott Agrees to Give Up Control of Cincinnati Reds Through '98". *New York Times*, 13 June 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Baker, Russell, "Baseball for Hitler". *New York Times*, 18 June 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Borzelleri was suspended as a columnist for *The Queens Ledger* for comparing Terri Thompson, a member of the Board of Education, with Hitler. O'Grady, Jim. *The New York Times*, 8 October 2000.

<sup>11</sup> For a perspective on the Bitburg controversy, see Meier, Charles S., *The Unmasterable Past: History,*

*Holocaust, and German National Identity*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1988, 9-16.

<sup>12</sup> See Newman, Andy, "Swastika Cut in Cornfield". *The New York Times*, 26 August 1996.

<sup>13</sup> "Swastika Graffiti Greet Students Going Back to Columbine High". *The New York Times*, 18 August 1999.

<sup>14</sup> A 14 year-old youth is sentenced for spray-painting swastikas on nature trail in Mamaroneck. See "A Swastika Painter Is Told to Read Frank". *The New York Times*, 15 April 1997; *Westchester Briefs*, 20 April 1997; and "In Brief: Hate Crimes". 17 May 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Lukacs, John, *The Hitler of History*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1997, 256.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted by Heiden, Konrad, *Der Fuehrer*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1944, 367.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Waite, Robert G. L., *Adolf...*, op. cit., 46.

<sup>18</sup> *Mein Kampf*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> *Mein Kampf*, 16.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Waite, Robert G. L., *Adolf...*, op. cit., 47.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>22</sup> Heiden, Konrad, *Der Fuehrer...*, op. cit., 367.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 367.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Waite, Robert G. L., *Adolf...*, op. cit., 20.

<sup>25</sup> Heiden, Konrad, *Der Fuehrer...*, op. cit., 367.

<sup>26</sup> Payne, Robert, *The Life and Death of Adolf Hitler*. New York, Praeger; 1973, 572.

<sup>27</sup> Bullock, Alan, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny, Completely Revised Edition*. New York, Harper & Row, 1962, 808.

<sup>28</sup> Fest, Joachim, *Hitler...*, op. cit., 3.

<sup>29</sup> Payne, Robert, *The life...*, op. cit., ix.

<sup>30</sup> Fest, Joachim, *Hitler...*, op. cit., 3.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Cecil, Robert, *The Myth of the Master Race: Alfred Rosenberg and Nazi Ideology*. New York, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1972, 96.

<sup>32</sup> *RUE MORGUE*, 293.