



*Hitler's Compromises: Coercion and Consensus in Nazi Germany* by Nathan Stoltzfus.

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In *Hitler's Compromises*, noted Holocaust scholar Nathan Stoltzfus (Florida State Univ.) argues that Adolf Hitler, when he wanted mass popular consent for his radical policies, was willing to back down, at least temporarily, in the face of public resistance:

Hitler established an unsteady “system” that precluded reaching any point of stability, but he hoped that the people themselves would pass along Nazi values. He aimed for a permanent National Socialism so that even after he no longer controlled the instruments of brute force, the people’s national community would pass along Nazi values from one generation to another in the one-thousand-year Reich. (5)

Stoltzfus labels Hitler a “soft dictator” in his relations with the German people; that is, he recognized that resorting to coercion could be more costly than compromising. In particular, he knew that the use of terror could alienate his supporters. Hitler foremost wanted to change the attitude of the Germans by fostering, in Nazi parlance, a *gesundes Volksempfinden* (healthy feeling of the *Volk*). To secure it, he backed down repeatedly when confronted by popular dissent, especially during the war. The present book assembles a chronological series of case studies to prove this thesis.

The first case study concerns Hitler’s insistence on following a legal path to power after the failed Munich Beer Hall Putsch. One may, of course, ask whether this decision really constituted a compromise: the openly putschist tactics advocated by the Storm Troopers had dismally failed in 1923 and would have been no less risky and disruptive in 1932; moreover, Hitler likely doubted that a violent takeover was even necessary. His strong preference for a (mostly) legitimate method of gaining power, while hardly a compromise, nonetheless confirms the author’s point that Hitler aimed to win over rather than forcibly compel the German people.

The book next delves into church-state conflicts, starting with the resistance of clerics to a unified, Nazi-controlled Evangelical church. Bishops Theophil Wurm and Hans Meiser mobilized crowds against such plans in Stuttgart and Nuremberg in 1934, but Hitler eschewed the use of force against them and let the matter go. Stoltzfus discusses as well the popular opposition to removing crucifixes from classrooms. Again, Hitler chose not to back his activist lower-level leaders, especially the *Gauleiter*, even though he shared their contempt for the people’s attachment to religious traditions and symbols.

Another chapter focuses on the Nazi use of street demonstrations to quell opposition. After touching briefly on the violent mobs of Kristallnacht, Stoltzfus describes Nazi efforts to use crowd pressure to oust the critical bishop Johannes Sproll of Marpingen (Württemberg). Sproll had condemned the regime’s anti-religious aspects and refused to vote for the annexation of Austria in March 1938. But the chaotic demonstrations quickly backfired and strengthened sympathy for Sproll, especially after the storming of his residence. Again, the regime, likely at Hitler’s behest, reined in its actions and the protests against Sproll stopped, though he was removed from his episcopal seat.

Stoltzfus stresses that the resistant clergymen and their supporters during these conflicts seemed to believe Hitler was on their side. While their petitions often voiced absolute confidence in the Führer, one may ask whether this reflected an expedient political choice rather than a genuine belief in a benign Hitler. That said, Hitler's compromises certainly fostered popular belief in his good will.

The author next highlights German military leaders' unease with the Führer's reckless foreign policy in the period from the remilitarization of the Rhineland (Mar. 1936) to the Munich Conference (Sept. 1938). The line of argument here is that Hitler, while pushing a spectacular but dangerous foreign policy, was again prepared to compromise when he saw that not only his military leaders but also large segments of the civilian populace opposed going to war.

This takes Stoltzfus to a perceptive discussion of a well-known case of popular opposition, namely, to the euthanasia program started at the beginning of the war. Clearly, Hitler hoped that Germans would come to accept ever-harsher treatment of "unproductive" community members. But popular opposition led by outspoken and courageous men like Judge Lothar Kreyssig and Bishop Clemens von Galen induced him first to close one of the most notorious killing centers and then to shut down the program altogether, though it did continue in a less visible and systematic form. In part, Hitler's decision reflected his wish to reassure a populace struggling under the growing burdens of the war. Interestingly, this compromise occurred just as Germans were becoming increasingly skeptical that Hitler was unaware of the killing program.

Another chapter concerns wartime evacuations of civilians, first on the western border of Germany in 1939 and then in the urban and industrial areas targeted by strategic bombing. These policies differed from the attacks on churches and the euthanasia program, since they were not based on Nazi ideological goals. The evacuations provoked some popular resistance, which the regime handled with surprising leniency. Many civilians disobeyed the relocation orders and even rioted in some places—with impunity. Opposition arose also against the removal of children from bombed cities. Many parents feared their children would be exposed to Nazi indoctrination and deprived of religious instruction. The conflict became so bitter that the regime considered prohibiting parental visits. Yet again, however, it tolerated dissidence and made various concessions. Railroad officials, for example, closed their eyes when evacuated adults bought train tickets to return home, and Hitler decided against withholding ration cards from them once they had returned.

Stoltzfus turns next to the Rosenstrasse protest (Mar. 1943), in which the non-Jewish wives of arrested Jewish men publicly protested in Berlin until their husbands were released. The arrests had followed longstanding pressure on gentile partners to divorce their Jewish spouses and threats against the vast majority who refused to comply.<sup>1</sup>

In the conclusion, Stoltzfus asserts that Hitler "wanted a total state, but he did not think that this was possible without establishing a total society, shaped by Nazi ideology" (263). The means to achieve this end included coercion, to be sure, but also compromise. In a long afterword, the author sets his work in the context of historiographical debates about the structure of the National Socialist state and its responses to dissent. He concedes that stressing Hitler's compromises is not a new idea (Hans Mommsen made the same observation with reference to euthanasia and the church question in 1976<sup>2</sup>), but maintains that his research facilitates an improved historical interpretation of the Third Reich from the "top down," reversing the trend toward "bottom up" perspectives started in the 1970s. I my-

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1. Stoltzfus reiterates here the findings presented in his well-known book *Resistance of the Heart: Intermarriage and the Rosenstrasse Protest in Nazi Germany* (1996; rpt. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers U Pr, 2001).

2. "National Socialism—Continuity and Change," in *Fascism: A Reader's Guide: Analyses, Interpretations, Bibliography*, ed. Walter Laqueur (Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 1976) 179–210.

self would argue that Stoltzfus has actually revealed a carefully calibrated give-and-take relationship between the regime and its people rather than offering a purely “top down” analysis.

Stoltzfus also uses the afterword to refute claims that the euthanasia program was halted only because it had reached its quota and because the professional killers were needed in eastern Europe. Similarly, regarding the Rosenstrasse protests, he denies that the Jewish men were arrested mostly for registration purposes and not deportation.

Altogether, Stoltzfus makes a persuasive case for Hitler’s willingness to compromise when faced with genuine popular dissent, but it is sometimes difficult to document that the dictator himself made the moderating interventions; that is, of course, a problem in assessing Hitler’s decision-making more generally. The book does show that the Reich’s compromises tended to strengthen Hitler’s image as a caring leader and helped stabilize the system even when they were diametrically opposed to his true intentions. In all of these conflicts, Hitler came across as a moderate reining in party fanatics.<sup>3</sup> The fact that popular dissent did at times make the regime back down raised a disquieting question for many Germans after the war—that is, what horrors might they have prevented by more outspoken opposition?

But would Hitler really have made significant compromises regarding fundamental axioms of his regime? He did, for example, consider war an absolute necessity and proceed to launch it even though he knew doing so would be unpopular with the German people. Would he have compromised during the war, had German public figures spoken out as strongly against the persecution and murder of Jews as they had against euthanasia? Most of the compromises Stoltzfus discusses concerned clashes between National Socialist policies and either the private sphere of German citizens or their long Christian traditions. In these cases, popular resistance did conflict with some Nazi priorities but did not endanger the regime itself, which reacted brutally when it sensed more fundamental challenges. While the Nazi authorities certainly reckoned that success in war would make their less popular goals more palatable, it is also true that terror and coercion increased in the later stages of the war—although the regime could still sometimes compromise.

I noted a few minor errors in the book. Wolfgang Kapp, the putschist of 1920, was a *civil servant*, not a *general*, and the famous document outlining Hitler’s plans for war in 1937 is the “Hoßbach,” not “Hössbach,” protocol. And the Stresa Front was not some generic post-World War I agreement but a Franco-British-Italian alignment under Mussolini’s leadership, formed in April 1935 in direct reaction to Hitler’s violating of the Treaty of Versailles by expanding the German army and creating an air force.

The book is elegantly written and thoroughly documented (ca. one hundred pages of footnotes). Stoltzfus relies heavily on published primary sources, understandable given the wealth of available materials and the scope of his project; he is also fully conversant with the relevant secondary literature. *Hitler’s Compromises* should be required reading for anyone interested in Adolf Hitler’s methods of securing and retaining absolute power.

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3. Cf. Ian Kershaw, *The “Hitler Myth”: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1987).