



Hitler: A Global Biography by Brendan Simms.

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This book mounts three interrelated arguments: (a) that Adolf Hitler was always far more preoccupied with Anglo-American capitalism than with Russian Bolshevism; (b) that he worried the German *Volk* were inferior to the Anglo-Saxons; (c) that the established scholarship on Hitler has concentrated on his murder of the Jews and other “undesirables” while, in comparison, neglecting his obsession with “positive eugenics” as a means to elevate the German people over their British and American rivals. The author, noted historian Brendan Simms¹ (Univ. of Cambridge), stipulates that his intent “is not merely ‘additive,’ the provision of a new dimension to an existing framework,” but “substitutive,” since “perhaps the history of the Third Reich more generally needs to be fundamentally rethought” (xviii–xix). His “global biography” is meant to highlight the primacy of Anglo-American power in Hitler’s thinking, something not (he believes) adequately accomplished in the relevant previous literature.² He goes so far as to question the centrality of the Eastern Front for Hitler in World War II.

Simms’s *Hitler* contains six parts. Part 1 concerns Hitler’s life up to 1918. Part 2 examines the early years of the National Socialist Party and Hitler’s conception of *Lebensraum* as the solution to Germany’s “racial degeneration.” Part 3 addresses his plans in 1928–32 to modernize Germany in order to meet the American challenge. With Hitler in power, Simms turns in Parts 4 and 5 to his economic, social, and racial initiatives and their acceleration in the face of Anglo-American hostility. Finally, Part 6 deals with the culmination of Hitler’s career and Germany’s confrontation with President Roosevelt’s America, the scramble for *Lebensraum*, and the murder of European Jews. The author believes that, in the end, “Hitler became convinced that only a truly global policy would be enough to secure the Reich against his enemies,” a conviction that ultimately led to Germany’s “second and even more destructive defeat at the hands, as Hitler saw it, of the ‘Anglo-Saxons,’ the Jews and their allies” (xxv).

The book is thus more a political than a military history of the evolution of Hitler’s perception of Germany’s place in a world where the British Empire was declining and the United States rising. Simms points out that, in his time on the Western Front during the Great War, Hitler encountered troops from Australia, Canada, India, and South Africa before the Americans joined the array of Germany’s adversaries. The experience taught him a painful lesson: to make war on the British Empire was to make war on much of the world. But in interwar Vienna, with its contend-

1. His earlier books include *Struggle for Mastery in Germany, 1779–1850* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998); *Unfinest Hour: Britain and the Destruction of Bosnia* (2001; rpt. NY: Penguin, 2001); *Three Victories and a Defeat: The Rise and Fall of the First British Empire, 1714–1783* (2007; rpt. NY: Basic Books, 2009); *Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy, 1453 to the Present* (NY: Basic Books, 2013); *The Longest Afternoon, The Four Hundred Men who Decided the Battle of Waterloo* (2014; rpt. NY: Basic Books, 2015) *Britain’s Europe: A Thousand Years of Conflict and Cooperation* (NY: Penguin, 2016); [with C. Laderman], *Donald Trump: The Making of a Worldview* (NY: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

2. E.g., Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (NY: Harper, 1962); Joachim C. Fest, *Hitler* (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974); Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936: Hubris* (NY: Norton, 1999), *Hitler, 1936–1945: Nemesis* (id. 2001).

ing ethno-nationalisms, this lesson morphed into a racial theory of Anglo-Saxon power as the true cause for Germany's defeat and subjugation.

This notion, the mainspring of Hitler's worldview, was so compelling that, Simms maintains, when the Bohemian corporal launched Germany's second bid to overturn the global balance of power, he actually considered the USSR a *secondary* adversary. If that is true, the author must explain why, after losing the Battle of Britain, Hitler seemed to have lost interest in the Western Front, pivoted east, and hurled 3 million men, 3,400 tanks and 2700 aircraft against the Soviet Union in the largest land offensive in history. Simms argues that

Barbarossa was conceived as both an anti-colonial and a colonizing enterprise. Hitler claimed that he was liberating Germany and the world from Anglo-American capitalist imperialism and Jewish manipulation, be it in the guise of plutocracy or of Bolshevism. The resources of the world, so unjustly hoarded by the "haves" would now be redistributed to the "have nots." Hitler therefore began his proclamation at the start of Barbarossa not by speaking of the Soviet Union, or even the Jews, but by attacking Britain and the balance of power with which it had oppressed Germany and continental Europe for generations. When London had entered the war, he argued, it marked the repeat of the British attempt to "prevent" the "consolidation of Europe" by the strongest European power of the time. Hitler inveighed once against the "new, hate-filled encirclement policy" of the "well-known conspiracy between Jews, democracies, Bolsheviks and reactionaries." It took him ten paragraphs before he actually began to speak about the Soviet Union, listing his gravamina, before circling back to lambast Britain once again. (421)

No matter how Hitler represented it in his writings or speeches, Barbarossa was genocidal in its execution: the extermination of the Jews was a principal, not an incidental, motive. Though Hitler declared war on the United States before its Congress could declare war on Germany, the Reich's most dangerous enemies before December 1941 were not the people of the United States and Great Britain but Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, both of whom understood better than their countrymen that Germany would have to be destroyed, not just defeated. And among the many appeasers and defeatists in the British Conservative Party early on in the war, it had never been certain that Churchill would even get the chance to be the war leader he became.³

Simms deals with strategy only loosely. Between his occupation of the Rhineland (1936) and the Battle of France (1940), Hitler applied a coherent strategy, evolving from menacing diplomacy to land war in Europe. Thereafter, all strategic bets were off. Simms insists that "it was in the context of the failure to mobilize Europe against Anglo-America that Hitler finally turned east" (379-94). But Hitler's thinking about the war was less a strategy than a mania. When the German army invaded the USSR (June 1941) his empire already extended from Norway to Africa and from the English Channel to the Bug River in Poland. Hitler's appetite for aggression thrust in every azimuth. In 1973, Joachim Fest wrote that those whose loyalty and admiration Hitler had won "never followed a vision, but only a force. In retrospect his life seems like a steady unfolding of tremendous energy. Its effects were vast, the terror it spread enormous; but when it was over there was little left for memory to hold."⁴

Serious scholarship on Hitler has established that the thread between the many scapegoats for Germany's defeat in the First World War, including the Anglo-American alliance, was hatred of

3. See, further, Kershaw (n. 2 above) *Nemesis*, 381-82; Ben H. Shepherd, *Hitler's Soldiers: The German Army in the Third Reich* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2016) 203-5; and John Lukacs, *Five Days in London May 1940* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1999) passim.

4. Fest (n. 2 above) 764.

the Jews. Anti-capitalism and anti-Bolshevism were supplementary neuroses for which Jews, again, were blamed. In this regard, Hitler was a garden-variety central European anti-Semite, a survivor of a war to which Kaiser Wilhelm II sacrificed a generation of his countrymen, whose understandable rage at being modern history's losers Hitler began to channel in the 1920s.

In the end, Simms's single-minded thesis that Hitler was motivated by both an admiration and a loathing of Anglo-American power makes the greatest monster of the twentieth century oddly less interesting as his analysis proceeds. But maybe there was, after all, less to Hitler than we like to imagine. In a passage about his appointment as chancellor, the author clarifies the constitutional flaws and political blunders that let him in to power through the back door. At the end of that process, Alfred Hugenberg, who accepted Hitler's appointment in return for a seat in his cabinet, realized only a moment too late that "I've just committed the greatest stupidity of my life. I have just allied myself with the greatest demagogue in world history" (184). This may be the most telling statement in *Hitler: A Global Biography*. Perhaps we overemphasize the thought and intentions of a great demagogue because conceding his fundamental mediocrity would say terrible things about our own credulity and cowardice in his presence.