

## HITLER STUDIES: A FIELD OF AMATEURS

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Recibido: 10 Noviembre 2005 / Revisado: 14 Diciembre 2005 / Aceptado: 9 Enero 2006 / Publicación Online: 15 Junio 2006

**Resumen:** One of the greatest mysteries of the century must be the failure of professional historians and biographers, for more than half a century after the event, to show much interest in actually explaining it. The fact that Hitler continues to be a mystery, however, is not a fact like other facts, to be recorded as a datum of history and passed over. A mystery, by definition, is the appearance of something surprising or unexpected that fairly calls out for an explanation. But, is it not one of the purposes of history (indeed, the major function of historians) to explain historical events and to make them understandable? Professional historians have consistently refused to get their hands dirty investigating the many mysteries of Hitler's life and career by going into the field to interview witnesses. Historians have not only failed, but have been charged by fellow historians with "evading," their duty to weave the facts of Hitler's life and career into a coherent and comprehensible narrative.

**Palabras Clave:** biography, Germany, historians, historiography, Hitler, nazism.

If the career of Adolf Hitler is one of the most catastrophic events of the entire twentieth century, including in its wake the most destructive war as well as the greatest crimes against humanity in human history, then one of the greatest mysteries of the century must be the failure of professional historians and biographers, for more than half a century after the event, to show much interest in actually explaining it.

Imagine, for example, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) waiting until some time after the year 2060 before interviewing witnesses and commencing its investigation of Osama bin Laden to discover how he was able to plan and carry out the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon that occurred on

September 11, 2001. Imagine further that in the intervening years all the work of interviewing witnesses and gathering the testimony, upon which subsequent investigators would have to rely if the whole story were ever to be told, was left to amateurs. Imagine next that FBI officials were loathe to explain the event, insisting that it was the "product of conditions", describing it in "metaphors", and insisting on giving abstract causes for it that were devoid of concrete facts as well as inherently implausible. Finally, imagine that Osama bin Laden became a man of mystery and intense public fascination—his face, even in caricature, known by almost every school child on the planet; his birthday, like the birthday of Hitler (the dreaded 4/20) known by almost every high school student; the high and low points of his life the subject of docu-dramas on prime time television and countless popular books, articles, novels, plays, and movies. Imagine an entire academic industry grown up to insist on the mystery and inexplicability of the man.

Impossible to imagine? Of course. But consider the attitude of professional historians to the case of Adolf Hitler, and the analogy may not seem as far-fetched as one might think.

Indeed, I intend to argue that it is a fair analogy to describe the failure of historians to investigate the case of Adolf Hitler, the man behind the most catastrophic events of the twentieth century.

Of course, this would not be a fair analogy for most historical events. Historians are not the FBI, and they do not normally investigate current events, or even recent events. There are several reasons for this.

The first and most important one is that rarely are the documents available until long after the event. In the case of major political leaders and

events, governments often keep documents sealed for fifty years or longer. Thus historians do not usually waste their time writing “histories” when they know that the most important information bearing on what happened is not available. Second, history is an ongoing process that tends to change the understanding of events as they later develop and come to fruition. Often events that seemed unimportant at the time acquire greater significance with the passage of time; decisions that seemed wise or foolish in the short run are sometimes seen to have been the height of folly or wisdom in the long run. Historians quite rightly do not wish to describe and explain events until they are fully played out. Thus historians usually wait until many decades after an event to describe both its genesis and its consequences.

In the case of Hitler, however, the analogy is pertinent because all of these preconditions were fulfilled by 1945 or, at the latest, by 1946. First, the eruption of Hitler and the Nazis came to a crushing end amid the ruins of the Third Reich. After the suicide of Hitler and the unconditional surrender of Germany, there was nothing more of Nazism to be developed or played out, except perhaps the trial of its leaders as war criminals and the judgment at Nuremberg, which was rendered by the end of 1946. After that, Nazism was as dead as a doornail and Hitler was nothing but “history”. Second, almost all of the documents and records of the Third Reich and the National Socialist Party were captured intact by the Allies, and, in a virtually unprecedented action, opened up to historians immediately after the war. Finally, the Nuremberg trials sealed the judgment of history on these events; there would be no re-interpretation. There were, therefore, no good reasons for historians not to begin writing a coherent biography of Hitler immediately after the war.

In addition, there were several very strong reasons for historians to do so. First, public interest in and, indeed, fascination with, the strange and mysterious career of Adolf Hitler and the bizarre events of the Third Reich has been high, not only in Germany but among the publics of the victorious Allies as well. Gordon A. Craig notes that as early as 1950, “appalled by the flood of books and articles about National Socialism that was pouring from the printing presses, a German journalist wrote, ‘He has played a trick on us. This Hitler, I think he’ll remain with us until the end of our lives’”<sup>1</sup>. In

the 1960’s, a new wave of interest in Hitler appeared as the first generation born after World War II matured. In Germany, this was called the “Hitler *Welle*”, or “Hitler Wave”. Normally a “wave” has a crest and a trough; however, as John Lukacs observed thirty years later in 1997, the “trough has not yet appeared”<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, the “wave” continues to grow. In 1975, it was reported that more than 50,000 serious books and scholarly articles had already been published, and bibliographers were complaining that their numbers were so high that it was becoming impossible to keep track of them. By 1995, it was reported that this number had increased by 70,000, to more than 120,000. To get some idea of the enormity of this research, that computes to more than twenty-four scholarly books and articles on Hitler and Nazism published *every working day for twenty years*—and the number is growing exponentially. Thus public interest in the mystery of Hitler continues to grow, with no end in sight.

Second, there were numerous witnesses available to be interviewed whose testimony would be vital to understanding solving the mystery. Historians were under a duty to track down these witnesses, interview them, and preserve their testimony before they died.

Third, and most importantly, Adolf Hitler was, and is still, an unsolved mystery. Biographer Robert Payne calls the rise of Hitler “most crucial and mystifying event of our century”<sup>3</sup>, while Eberhard Jäckel calls it “the seminal question of the twentieth century”<sup>4</sup>. Percy Ernst Schramm speaks for all historians when he writes: “By virtue of his personality, his ideas, and the fact that he misled millions, Hitler poses an historical problem of the first magnitude”<sup>5</sup>. H. R. Trevor-Roper writes that, despite the passage of half a century, “Hitler remains a frightening mystery”<sup>6</sup>.

The fact that Hitler continues to be a mystery, however, is not a fact like other facts, to be recorded as a datum of history and passed over. A mystery, by definition, is the appearance of something surprising or unexpected that fairly calls out for an explanation. But, is it not one of the purposes of history—indeed, the major function of historians—to explain historical events and to make them understandable? Are historical problems of the “first magnitude” to be simply declared “inexplicable?” Is Hitler to live on as history’s greatest mystery—the most

unique and inexplicable man who ever lived? If the answer to these questions is “no”, then we must inquire into the responsibility of historians as to why the mystery remains.

In light of these questions, what are the duties of professional historians? Theodor Mommsen long ago set out criteria for what is minimally expected of historians: “History”, he said, “is nothing but the distinct knowledge of actual happenings, consisting on the one hand of the discovery and examination of the available testimony, and on the other of the weaving of this testimony into a narrative in accordance with one’s understanding of the men who shaped the events and the conditions that prevailed”<sup>7</sup>. Thus historians have two minimal duties: 1) to discover and examine the available testimony; and 2) to weave it into a coherent narrative.

In regard to the rise of Hitler, historians have failed this definition on both counts. On the first count, professional historians have consistently refused to get their hands dirty investigating the many mysteries of Hitler’s life and career by going into the field to interview witnesses. Were it not for a handful of amateurs who ventured to go where the “angels” of the historical profession feared to tread, we would not have many of the materials upon which historians are now relying to solve the mystery.

On the second count, historians have not only failed, but have been charged by fellow historians with “evading,” their duty to weave the facts of Hitler’s life and career into a coherent and comprehensible narrative. Instead, Hitler remains an unexplained mystery, an “unperson,” unique in all human history, declared to be “inexplicable.”

The reason for the vast and rising public and scholarly interest in Hitler, I submit, is simple: he continues to be a mystery. The attraction involved in such a mystery was once described by Albert Einstein, who said (in another context but nonetheless applicable here): “The most beautiful thing we can experience is a mystery”.

Hitler become beautiful? This is a terrifying thought. But the fact is that the most horrible things—from Frankenstein to Dracula to Godzilla to the Slime Monster—can become fascinating and attractive when wrapped in mystery. Peter Wyden has written of the increasing public fascination with Hitler as the

“Hitler virus”<sup>8</sup>. The danger, as Saul Friedländer warns, is that such continued fascination may result in an “inversion of signs and the beginning of a new discourse about Evil”<sup>9</sup>.

It is the purpose of this article to discuss the responsibility of historians for the continuing mystery of Hitler and the corresponding fascination it attracts, in terms of the two duties that Mommsen laid upon them: 1) the duty to investigate and gather the facts necessary to solve the mystery; and 2) the duty to weave the facts into a coherent narrative.

## 1. THE FAILURE OF HISTORIANS TO INVESTIGATE

The most fundamental and difficult question in the field of Hitler studies is the question of how this uneducated high-school dropout and bum from the streets of Vienna ever came to be one of the most outstanding orators and political organizers in German if not all modern history. Strangely, the professional historians have avoided this question as though it were a case of AIDS. Surely, unless there were some miracle in Hitler’s life at the age of thirty when he attended his first political meeting<sup>10</sup>, any historian worth his salt would be looking into this man’s early life to find the secret of his success at gaining power. Yet, instead of going into the field to find and interview every person who ever knew the young Hitler, as any good private detective would have done, the professional historians sat at their desks for fifty years, leaving all of the tracking down and interviewing of witnesses to amateur historians. Fortunately, there were several amateurs who stepped in to fill the gap, and it is to them that we owe most of everything that we know of the young Hitler other than what this most secretive of men chose to tell. The first of these was Franz Jetzinger, author *Hitlers Jugend: Phantasien, Lügen, und die Wahrheit* (1956)<sup>11</sup>. Jetzinger was not a historian but a Social Democratic politician who served as a deputy in the Provincial Assembly of Upper Austria for fifteen years before the Second World War. After the war he secured a post as librarian of the provincial archives in Linz. Jetzinger hated Hitler with a passion, and in 1946 began searching for every document and interviewing every witness he could locate in connection with Hitler’s youth. It is to Jetzinger that we owe much of our knowledge of the documents of Hitler’s family, his ancestors, his father’s change of name, and where the family lived.

Jetzinger's interviews of those who had known Hitler and his family have also proved invaluable, perhaps the most important of which was his discovery of Hitler's only childhood friend, August Kubizek, whom Jetzinger located, interviewed, and goaded into writing a much longer set of his own memoirs. The latter were published in 1953 as *Adolf Hitler, mein Jugendfreund*<sup>12</sup>, and constitute the only testimony we have from anyone who knew Hitler as a youth.

Kubizek's memoirs are important as the first and only insight into, as H. R. Trevor-Roper writes in the Introduction to Kubizek's memoirs, the incipient character of the man who "without any other natural advantage besides his own personality, became the most powerful and terrible tyrant and conqueror of modern history"<sup>13</sup>. It was only through the indefatigable work of Jetzinger, however, that this witness was discovered and his testimony obtained before he died. If it had been left to the professional historians, we would never have known of Kubizek, and his memoirs might never have been written and published.

The next amateur to do what professional historians ought to have done was Werner Maser. Maser was a simple soldier during the War who spent time in both American and Russian prisoner of war camps and, upon his release, studied in East Berlin. Emigrating to the West in 1952, he worked first as a journalist before realizing that the investigation of Hitler was being completely ignored by the professional historians. He set out to fill the vacuum.

"Maser's main achievement", writes John Lukacs, "was the unearthing of large quantities of data through his tireless research"<sup>14</sup>. Much of this data came from Maser's relentless efforts to track down the testimony of witnesses who knew Hitler, and his determination to collect and preserve their testimony before they died. Between 1965 and 1973, he produced four huge volumes on the history of the National Socialist party and Hitler's early career, followed by a book on *Mein Kampf*, a biography of Hitler, and a book on Hitler's papers and documents<sup>15</sup>.

Though Maser was clearly carrying out the first duty of a historian according to Theodor Mommsen, his work was not appreciated by professional historians. Rather, as Lukacs notes, he was excluded from "the higher circle of

German academic historians"<sup>16</sup> (One is reminded of the attitude of professional police forces toward private detectives in mystery novels: their results in solving cases are grudgingly recognized, but the detectives themselves are looked down upon).

To give some idea of the importance of both Jetzinger and Maser, it is worth noting how much their work is relied upon by professionals. In Ian Kershaw's recent biography, *Hitler: Hubris 1889-1936*, for example, ninety of the 164 footnotes to the chapter on Hitler's youth (Chapter I) cite Jetzinger, Maser, or Kubizek—and almost all of these are for factual information—while of the remaining seventy-four footnotes, twenty-seven cite to Hitler himself (i.e., *Mein Kampf*), or are largely interpretational. Thus, almost everything we know of the facts of Hitler's early life, except what Hitler himself chooses to tell us, comes from these amateurs who did the primary research, and gathered the testimony while the witnesses were alive.

John Toland, author of *Adolf Hitler* (New York, Doubleday, 1976), is the next amateur to begin doing what the professionals should have done. Toland began researching his biography of Hitler in the 1960s by visiting every place Hitler had ever lived and talking to people who knew him. Toland located over 250 witnesses, and was amazed to find that many of them had never been interviewed by a professional historian<sup>17</sup>.

Perhaps the most damning evidence of the failure of professional historians to do primary research, however, is Brigitta Hamann, author of *Hitler's Wien: Lehrjahre eines Diktators (1996)*<sup>18</sup>. Hamann is a historian of the nineteenth century who left her normal field because of the glaring failure of historians to check their sources. She was the first scholar to evaluate the mass of conflicting testimonies from the Vienna period of Hitler's life.

During the 1930s and later, many highly questionable sources came forward with exposés about Hitler containing much sensational and contradictory information. Professional historians were in the habit of uncritically roaming through these materials to quote whatever random piece of information fit their theory. Until Hamann, it rarely occurred to professional historians to actually study the materials evaluate their credibility, to correct inaccuracies, or resolve contradictions.

Hamann's work provides a healthy and necessary corrective to the works of many professional historians.

In conducting her research, Hamann also noted the names of many people whose existence had long been known to historians, but who had never been interviewed. One such man, for example, roomed with Hitler in Munich in 1913-14. Of course, by the time Hamann did her research, this man was dead, and she could only interview his surviving relatives. But the point is that few professional historians until Hamann—half a century after Hitler's death—did what one would expect them to do, namely, locate, interview, check, and evaluate the sources.

Thus, the field of Hitler studies is considerably poorer because of the failure of professional historians to carry out their first duty, that of collecting and preserving the evidence. Further, they waited for historians from outside the field to even begin the most elementary evaluation of sources. When one hears professional historians claiming that Hitler is "inexplicable" because of the lack of evidence<sup>19</sup>, one should ask: what did professional historians do to locate the witnesses and to gather their testimony while they were still alive? Why did they uncritically accept sensational testimony without performing the most elementary evaluation of its accuracy, reliability and credibility? Unfortunately, the field of Hitler studies has been a "field for amateurs".

## 2. EVADING THE HISTORICAL PROBLEM OF HITLER

The charge of evasion is not a new one. In fact, it was first raised as early as 1953 by the man who is often called the "Dean of Hitler Studies", H. R. Trevor-Roper. Eight years after Hitler's death, Trevor-Roper published an essay entitled "The Mind of Adolf Hitler," in which he accused historians of "evading" the two unanswered questions that constitute "the problem with Hitler". Those two unanswered questions are: 1) Who was this man? and 2) How did he do it? In the first paragraph, Trevor-Roper starkly charges historians with evading both:

"Who was Hitler? The history of his political career is abundantly documented and we cannot escape from its terrible effects. A whole generation may well be named in history after him and we shall speak of the Age of Hitler as

we speak of the Age of Napoleon or the Age of Charlemagne. And yet, for all the harsh obviousness of its imprint on the world, how elusive his character remains! What he did is clear; every detail of his political activity is now—thanks to a seizure and exploitation of documents unparalleled in history—historically established; his daily life and personal behavior have been examined and exposed. But still, when asked not what he did but how he did it, or rather how he was able to do it, historians evade the question, sliding away behind implausible answers"<sup>20</sup> (Emphases added).

Trevor-Roper then goes on to offer a list of the implausible theories given by historians, which have changed little in half a century:

"To the Marxists—most old-fashioned of all—he was simply a pawn, the creature of a dying capitalism in its last stages. Others have seen him as a charlatan profiting by a series of accidents, a consummate actor and hypocrite, a sly, cheating peasant, or a hypnotist who seduced the wits of men by a sorcerer's charms. Even sir Lewis Namier endorses an account of him given by a disgusted German official as a mere illiterate, illogical, unsystematic bluffer and smatterer. Even Mr. Bullock seems content to regard him as a diabolical adventurer animated solely by an unlimited lust for power".

Trevor-Roper insists that these are not explanations but evasions—negative labels that explain nothing. In dismay he asks, "Could a mere adventurer, a shifty, scatterbrained charlatan, have done what Hitler did, who, starting from nothing...nearly conquered the whole world?" But in answer to his question, Trevor-Roper is met only by the silence of statues: "So we ask", writes Trevor-Roper, "but we seldom receive an answer: the historians have turned away, and, (he adds, sardonically), like antique heroes, we only know that we have been talking with the immortals from the fact that they are no longer there". In other words, in the face of Hitler, like a Medusa, historians have turned to stone.

After Trevor-Roper's charge of evasion, one might have expected an avalanche of articles contesting his charges, and a multitude of new biographies of Hitler to come from the pens of professional historians in order to prove him wrong. Instead, one was met with, as Trevor-Roper suggested, the "silence of statues". One searches in vain for an article denying the

charge, and equally in vain to find a professional historian writing a coherent biography of Hitler that truly addresses the questions Trevor-Roper raised.

A review of the major biographies published in the first half century after Hitler's death amply confirms Trevor-Roper's charge<sup>21</sup>. Prior to 1953, there were only two postwar biographies of Hitler that could be called major, well-researched works. The first of these was Alan Bullock's *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, published in 1952, the year before Trevor-Roper's accusation—and, indeed, the work that provoked Trevor-Roper to make it. The second was Walter Görlitz' and Herbert A. Quint's *Adolf Hitler: eine Biographie*, also published in 1952. Görlitz and Quint's biography was as much on Trevor-Roper's mind as Bullock's.

In the next forty-five years after Trevor-Roper made his charges against professional historians, there have been only three other major biographies of Hitler that are worthy of mention as new, significant, in-depth, scholarly, well-researched, and complete attempts to write a narrative history of this man. These are: 1) William L. Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, published in 1960; 2) Joachim Fest's *Hitler*, published in 1973; and 3) John Toland's, *Adolf Hitler*, published in 1976. What is astonishing about this list is that of these five biographies (including Bullock and Görlitz and Quint), only *one* of their authors (Bullock) is, or was at the time of writing, a professional historian.

For a long time after World War II, the only major biography written by and for Germans was Görlitz' and Quint's *Adolf Hitler: Eine Biographie*. Görlitz and Quint, however, were simply two amateur historians who wrote under pseudonyms. Görlitz' true name was Otto Julius Frauendorf, while Quint's was Richard Freiherr v. Frankenberg. Both were Pomeranian conservatives whose only qualification was that their hobby was military history. Frauendorf and von Frankenberg jumped into a field vacated by the professionals to provide a young generation of Germans coming of age after the war with the only postwar biography of the man who was responsible for the destruction they saw all around them. Frauendorf later went on to a successful career in journalism. One might ask: Where were all the academic historians who occupy prestigious chairs of history at universities? The answer is: they were sitting at

their desks drawing very good salaries and dreaming of an “inexplicable” Hitler who would absolve them of their obligation to write history.

The first major biography of Hitler to appear after Trevor-Roper made his charge of evasion against professional historians was William A. Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. Shirer, too, was not a professional historian; rather, like Frauendorf, he was a journalist-turned-amateur-historian. Shirer had been an American correspondent in Berlin in the 1930s covering Hitler after he came into power. In 1943, he published the memoirs of his experiences as *Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent 1934-1941*<sup>22</sup>.

In the Preface of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* Shirer records his reasons for becoming an amateur historian. A review of them amply confirms the charge of “evasion” made by Trevor-Roper. It is worth quoting Shirer at length for the light he sheds on the attitudes of the professional historians he encountered when he began his biography.

“Though I lived and worked in the Third Reich [Shirer explains] during the first half of its brief life, watching at first hand Adolf Hitler consolidate his power...this personal experience would not have led me to attempt this book had there not occurred at the end of World War II an event unique in history. This was the capture of the most confidential archives of the German government and all its branches. . . the National Socialist Party and Heinrich Himmler's secret police. Never before, I believe, has such a rich treasure fallen into the hands of contemporary historians”<sup>23</sup>.

Yet never, Shirer writes, had such a “rich treasure” been so completely ignored by professional historians. Had they researched the documents and written scholarly biographies explaining the times and events, Shirer would never have attempted to compete with them, and rested content on his journalistic memoirs. But where such a “rich treasure” was being positively shunned by the professional historians, Shirer explains, it felt right to the journalist in him to walk where the angels of the historical profession feared to tread, and to tell the story as he saw it.

Shirer also recorded the arguments made by professionals to *discourage* him from writing a biography of Hitler—arguments that surprised

Shirer as much as they would have surprised Theodor Mommsen. Shirer portrays the crustiness of professional historians by detailing the rationalizations they employed to argue against writing a biography of Hitler. He refers first to those professionals who advised him that this unique cache of documents and materials should be not examined at all, but “left to a later generation of writers”. “Most historians”, they argued to him, “waited fifty years, or a hundred, or more, before attempting to write an account of a country, an empire, or an era”.

“But”, Shirer asks in reply, “was this not principally because it took that long for the pertinent documents to come to light and furnish them with the authentic materials they needed?” In the case of Hitler, the materials were already present and were begging to be studied—but the professional historians insisted that no attempt should be made to weave them into a historical narrative.

Next, Shirer felt that he had to defend himself against those professionals who insisted that historians had to wait decades before writing in order to gain “perspective”. To this objection he replies, “And though perspective was gained, was not something lost because the authors necessarily lacked a personal acquaintance with the life and atmosphere of the times and with the historical figures about which they wrote?” But the professional historians were unconvinced and, like Trevor-Roper’s “antique heroes”, turned away.

Finally, against all the professionals Shirer quotes one of the first and greatest historians, Thucydides, who prefaced his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, with this clinching justification for writing history fresh: “I lived through the whole war”. Thucydides writes, “being of an age to comprehend events and giving my full attention to them in order to know the exact truth about them”.

Modern historians, Shirer implies, were either not “of an age to comprehend events”, or did not want to “know the exact truth about them.”

In any event, Shirer argues, the Third Reich is a “unique case”, and he, for one, though not a professional historian, would not wait “fifty years, or a hundred, or more”, to research and write history about a time he had personally lived through and experienced, especially when “such incomparable sources” were available.

Shirer’s book was published in 1960 and was received by both the public and reviewers in the United States like rain after a drought. It was a great success and was rapidly translated and published with great fanfare to a European public equally thirsty for historical understanding. Shirer’s book also coincided with the capture and trial of Adolf Eichmann, which sparked an even greater interest in the mystery of Hitler and the Nazi period. The 1960’s became known as the beginning of the “Hitler Welle” or “Hitler Wave”, a period of intense public fascination with Hitler, marked by a avalanche of sensational biographies by non-historians, and popular books, articles, plays, television programs, films, and documentaries on the Nazi period.

Nonetheless, Shirer’s narrative, like Maser’s research, was not warmly received by academic historians. Shirer’s view was that Hitler was just another world conqueror in the same vein as Caesar or Napoleon. While the professionals disagreed with this assessment, they did not act to provide any new or better narrative. Rather, professional historians were content to offer little but specialized studies of aspects of Hitler’s career and the Nazi period. The only two notable exceptions were Helmut Heiber’s *Adolf Hitler: Eine Biographie* (1960), which offered “insightful passages,” but little more than the same “conventional”<sup>24</sup> explanations of Hitler that Trevor-Roper had criticized as evasions; and Ernst Deuerlein’s *Hitler: eine politische Biographie* (1960), which, although still considered to be “the best short Hitler biography”<sup>25</sup>, was too short to weave together any new, comprehensive narrative into the facts.

By the end of the 1960s, therefore, the public was all but clamoring for a comprehensive, scholarly biography by a professional historian. But they were not to get it. Instead, what they got was the most “definitive” biography of Hitler, Joachim Fest’s *Hitler*, published in 1973. But this also, like Shirer’s work thirteen years before, was not written by an academic historian. Fest began his career as a radio and television reporter who went on to become one of Germany’s leading journalists. At the time of writing *Hitler*, he was a member of the editorial board of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Fest’s biography was a huge success, and Fest went on to become one of Germany’s leading historians. But he broke into the “club” by doing what the academics and practicing professionals had failed to do. Nor did Fest’s biography solve

the mystery of Hitler or meet Mommsen's criterion of a narrative. Instead, Fest evaded the problem by simply placing Hitler outside of history ("History records no phenomenon like him"<sup>26</sup>), and declaring him to be an "unperson", whose personality "scarcely arouses our interest"<sup>27</sup>.

Two years later, surveying the attempts of historians to come to grips with this "unperson", Fritz Stern, a German professor of literature, sadly concluded that historians were simply baffled.

"As we go down the list of the more important biographers...we find each more meticulous than his predecessor in the sifting of fact from fiction, of documented evidence from inference and interpretation...Yet there is a point at which it is apt to defeat its own purpose, which I take to be an understanding of history. A montage of historical minutiae...does not necessarily lead to better insight. More details often entail less sense. . . *The facts of the case—chief among them the metamorphosis of the Nobody from Vienna into the Leader of Greater Germany—are so extraordinary that when they are 'left to tell their own story' they hardly make any sense at all*"<sup>28</sup> (Emphasis added).

Thus by 1975, thirty years after Hitler's death, it was still the considered judgment of scholars that historians had failed to weave the facts into a coherent narrative. But not even Stern's judgment provoked professional historians into action. The next major biography, John Toland's *Adolf Hitler* (1976)<sup>29</sup>, not by a professional historian, either.

Toland was a budding playwright, short-story author, and novelist who fell into writing history at the age of forty-five by accident—or by "fate," as he tells in his autobiography, *{captured} by History: One Man's Vision of Our Tumultuous Century* (1997)<sup>30</sup>. Toland admits from the beginning that he had no story line with which to tie together the facts of Hitler's life into a narrative. "My book has no thesis," he writes; except that "Hitler was far more complex and contradictory than I had imagined"<sup>31</sup>. Toland, therefore, merely piles fact upon fact but at least admits that, as Fritz Stern had said, they "hardly make any sense at all".

By the end of the 1970s, therefore, more than a third of a century after Hitler's death, that there were only five major scholarly biographies of

Hitler—Bullock's, Görnitz and Quint's, Shirer's, Fest's, and Toland's—only one of which, Alan Bullock's *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (1952), was written by a professional historian. After Bullock, professional and academic historians merely confirmed Trevor-Roper's charge: they continued to evade the issue, leaving the field to amateurs.

As a result, the field of Hitler studies became littered with dozens of sensational and amateurish, as well as hack-conventional biographies of Hitler. Psychologists were having a field day, with explanations of Hitler that included everything from a goat biting his penis to theories of monorchism and an over-protective mother<sup>32</sup>. But, in the absence of historians doing their duty, the mystery only intensified.

At about this time, another amateur historian seized the opportunity to enter the field that professional historians left vacant, and began rooting through the documents, sometimes coming up with well-researched, and at other times presenting poorly researched, amateurish, politicized, and highly controversial results. This was David Irving, who, while not attempting a new biography of Hitler, built a career on showing that many professional historians had not done their homework.

Word slowly began to percolate into the minds of professional historians that something was amiss. By the 1980s, professional historians finally began to enter the field, not with comprehensive biographies of Hitler, but with "studies" of his personality and "footnotes" to his character<sup>33</sup>. But these only heightened the mystery. A consciousness began dawning among professional historians that the problem with Hitler could no longer be swept under the rug. Thus there broke out in Germany in the mid-1980s one of the most remarkable debates in the history of scholarship. This was the "*Historikerstreit*"—a prolonged and bitter debate among professional historians that flew far beyond the normal orbit of academic journals and landed in the popular media, inviting amateur historians as well as the general public to participate.

The gist of the debate, although not directly mentioned, was Trevor-Roper's charge a third of a century earlier that historians were "evading" the problem of Hitler. This point was most clearly made by Martin Broszat in 1987, when

he charged that “the older generation of German historians... very often resorted to writing about a ‘demonic’ or ‘diabolical’ Hitler and the like as a consequence of their inability to offer historical explanations”<sup>34</sup>. “In contrast with this”, Broszat insisted, “there has long been a need for more rational explanation”. Broszat opposed what he called history by “metaphor”, arguing that such an evasive approach to history tended to “impede further questioning rather than furnish answers”.

This, of course, was precisely what the Englishman, Trevor-Roper, had argued a third of a century earlier, in 1953. Nor was it an entirely new claim in German scholarship. A decade before, Karl Dietrich Bracher had accused historians of a falsification of history in relation to Hitler that he called “Ghenghis Khanism”. With such an attitude, Bracher argued, how “difficult” it is to “understand and explain the rise of a man from so narrow and parochial an existence to a formidable figure on whom depended a development of such universally historical dimensions and consequences”<sup>35</sup>. The failure to properly research and provide a coherent account of Hitler had provoked a “civil war” among historians.

The *Historikerstreit* went on for several years and produced some remarkable characterizations of professional historians—or at least the dominant professional historians in Germany. Foremost among these critics was Joachim Fest who referred to the latter as “keepers of the seal” who had “become the ‘mandarins of myths.’” Because of their attitudes, he charged, “Hitler and National Socialism, despite years of study and reflection, have remained more myth than history”<sup>36</sup>.

Essentially, the *Historikerstreit* boiled down the soup of Hitler studies into two insoluble lumps. One “lump” claimed that Hitler, the Nazis, the Third Reich, and the Holocaust were unique in all history, and could not be compared to, or explained in terms of, any other previous human experience. This lump also argued that Hitler was so irrational and illogical that nothing that he did could ever make sense or be explained. The other “lump” claimed that “the simplest rules that are in effect for every past have been suspended”<sup>37</sup>, and that while Hitler may have been both mad and evil, nevertheless who he was and what he did could be reduced to history and made explainable to ordinary mortals. Thus,

to one “lump”, Hitler sits astride history like a supernatural, evil demon, defying rationality and explanation; while the other “lump” argues that Hitler was nothing but just one more, albeit horrible, event in human history that can and should be subject to explanation just like all other events.

However much the *Historikerstreit* stirred up the waters of academe, it nonetheless failed to produce any major, newly researched, and scholarly biography of Hitler. Thus in 1998, when Ron Rosenbaum published his foray into the world of Hitler Studies, *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil*, he could only report that: “The real search for Hitler—the search for who he was, who he thought he was, and why he did what he did—has been an expedition into a realm far more inaccessible than the rain-forest jungles of Argentina”. Rosenbaum describes the state of Hitler studies as “a terra incognita where armies of scholars clash in evidentiary darkness”. The “evidentiary darkness” to which Rosenbaum refers is precisely the failure of professional historians to document and preserve the sources and testimony discussed in the first part of this article. Theodor Mommsen is turning over in his grave.

Thus we had to wait until 1998—fifty-three years after the death of Hitler, forty-five years after the first biography of Hitler by a professional historian, twenty-two years after the last major biography by a non-professional, and twelve years after the beginning of the *Historikerstreit*—for a second professional historian to venture a newly researched biography of Hitler. This was Ian Kershaw, whose first volume, *Hitler: Hubris 1889-1936*, was published in 1998, followed by the second volume, *Hitler: Nemesis 1936-1945* in 1999.

Unfortunately, however, this work turned out to be a major disappointment. While excellently researched (with 362 pages of footnotes) and engagingly written, the author admits in the Introduction that he is without a clue as to how to answer the questions Trevor-Roper accused historians of “evading”. Kershaw, however, at least acknowledges the problem:

“How do we explain how someone with so few intellectual gifts and social attributes, someone no more than an empty vessel outside his political life, unapproachable and impenetrable even for those in close company, incapable, it

seems of genuine friendship, without the background that bred high office, without even any experience of government before becoming Reich Chancellor, could nevertheless have such an immense historical impact, could make the entire world hold its breath?"<sup>38</sup>.

Rather than attempting answer this question, however, Kershaw does exactly what Trevor-Roper accused professional historians of doing: he immediately evades it, asserting that it is "falsely posed". Instead, Kershaw declares that Hitler (in a famous phrase borrowed from Winston Churchill), is "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma"<sup>39</sup>. Therefore, Kershaw argues, there is no need to explain him. To a professional historian, it seems, a mystery is not something to be solved, uncovered, revealed, or explained; it is simply another datum, to be worked in with all the other facts, and treated as though it, too, were a "fact".

Thus Kershaw's biography proceeds to tell not the story of Hitler the man—which is what *biography* is supposed to be—but only the story of Hitler's power: "*the character of his power—the power of the Führer*"<sup>40</sup> (Kershaw's emphasis). In other words, Kershaw treats Hitler as nothing more than the effects he caused, insisting mysteriously that there was no one behind the effects. When Kershaw seeks to go behind "*the power of the Führer*" to explain who this man was and how he did it, he finds nothing—only what he calls a "void" or a "black hole." "There was no 'private life' for Hitler"<sup>41</sup>, he insists. Kershaw fails not only to provide a coherent narrative, but insists that the most stupendous effects of the twentieth century were all caused by "the little man who wasn't there".

What has been the result of the failure of historians to weave a narrative of the facts of Hitler's life and career, a duty that Theodor Mommsen laid upon them as part of the essence of their profession? It is that Adolf Hitler continues to stand athwart the stream of history as the most mysterious man who ever lived, frustrating all efforts of the best and wisest academicians of the age to explain him or to fit the experience of the twentieth century into narrative history.

Ron Rosenbaum was the first journalist to sense a significant story in the failure of historians to render a coherent account of Hitler. Rosenbaum researched the literature and interviewed a dozen of the most prominent scholars in the

field of Hitler Studies in order to document the "scandal" (that's my word not Rosenbaum's) involved in the failure of historians to "explain Hitler." In *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil* (1997), Rosenbaum charges that Hitler has simply "*escaped explanation*" (Rosenbaum's emphasis). Rosenbaum writes eloquently of his amazement at what he found to be the state of Hitler studies:

"Is it conceivable, more than half a century after Hitler's death, after all that's been written and said, that we're still wandering in this trackless wilderness, this garden of forking paths, with no sight of our quarry? Or, rather, alas, with too many quarries? The search for Hitler has apprehended not one coherent, consensus image of Hitler but rather many different Hitlers, competing Hitlers, conflicting embodiments of competing visions. Hitlers who might not recognize each other well enough to say "*Heil*" if they came face to face in Hell"<sup>42</sup>.

Among professional historians, Rosenbaum describes what he calls three "levels of despair" induced by the failure to explain Hitler. The most extreme level he calls the "revolt against explanation itself"<sup>43</sup>. Some historians seriously hold that any attempt to explain Hitler is "immoral." These historians insist that Hitler must forever remain a mystery, and that history must never attempt to explain him. Any explanation is considered, reports Rosenbaum, "dangerous, forbidden, a transgression of near biblical proportions". Theodor Mommsen is now doing cartwheels in his grave.

The second level of despair, which Rosenbaum labels "moderate," is based on the inability of historians to find any narrative into which Hitler fits or any new theory to explain him. It is the general consensus of historians that Hitler is simply not explainable by "the systems of explanation, historical and psychological, that we use to explain ordinary human behavior"<sup>44</sup>. Thus it is considered "moderate" to acknowledge the bankruptcy of imagination of the historical profession in its failure to find any narrative understandable to ordinary human beings or any credible explanation of the most stupendous events of the twentieth century.

Shortly after the rise of Hitler, Hermann Göring boastfully predicted that "In later time 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>45</sup>.

It seems to be the position of “moderate” historians today that Göring was right.

Rosenbaum calls the third level of despair that he found among professional historians “evidentiary despair”. This is the argument that, while it is not impossible to explain Hitler “in theory”, it has become impossible because the evidence has disappeared. In other words, historians excuse their profession for its collective failure to *explain* Hitler by arguing that, while the possibility may once have existed, it is no longer possible “because too many crucial witnesses have died without giving testimony”, because “too much evidence was not collected in time”, or because “too many memories have faded”<sup>46</sup>. This brings us full circle: the third level of despair not only admits the truth of the second charge against professional historians, the failure to weave the facts into a coherent narrative, but also proves the first charge, the failure to investigate and preserve evidence.

## CONCLUSION

Returning to the image with which this article began, imagine that Osama bin Laden had been killed during America’s invasion of Afghanistan in the fall of 2001, and that the entire network of Al Qaeda leaders were captured and put on public trial, ending forever their terrorist threat to the world. Imagine further that all of the records of Al Qaeda were captured and made available to scholars, including thousands of pages of writings by Osama bin Laden himself as well as large numbers of books, memoirs, and reminiscences by his childhood friends, associates, and confederates. Is it possible that professional historians would for the next sixty years fail to interview the people who knew him, refuse to write scholarly biographies of the man, ignore the records, pronounce the entire event inexplicable, and leave the research of these events to amateurs? If they would, then Osama bin Laden would undoubtedly grow into a man of mystery and fascination to the general public, just as Hitler has. The twenty-first century would be explained by historians like the twentieth: one inexplicable catastrophe after another—all caused by “unpersons”.

In summary, the responsibility for the fact that Hitler is still a mystery, and that public interest in him is high and growing, is at least partly caused by the failure of professional historians

to carry out the responsibilities of their profession. They have failed, at least according to the two minimal criteria established by Theodor Mommsen: 1) to investigate and preserve the evidence; and 2) to weave the facts into a coherent narrative.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Craig, Gordon A., “Fate & the Fuehrer”. *The New York Review of Books*, 2 November 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Lukacs, John, *The Hitler of History*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1997, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Payne, Robert, *The Life and Death of Adolf Hitler*. New York, Praeger, 1973, xii.

<sup>4</sup> Jäckel, Eberhard, *Hitler in History*. Hannover, University Press of New England, 1984, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Schramm, Percy Ernst, *Hitler: The Man and Military Leader*. Chicago, Quadrangle Books; 1971, 123.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Rosenbaum, Ron, *Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil*. New York, Random House, 1998, xv and 68 (Hereinafter cited as Rosenbaum).

<sup>7</sup> Mommsen Theodor, “Rectoral Address delivered at the University of Berlin in 1874”, in Fritz Stern, (ed.), *The Varieties of History From Voltaire to the Present*. New York, Meridian Books, 1956, 192.

<sup>8</sup> Wyden, Peter, *The Hitler Virus: The Insidious Legacy of Adolf Hitler*. New York, Arcade Publishing, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Freidländer, Saul, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*. New York, Harper & Row, 1984, 107.

<sup>10</sup> Rosenbaum writes of the efforts of historians to find “in the facts of Hitler’s life before he came to power some single, transformative moment, some dramatic trauma, or some life-changing encounter with a Svengali-like figure -a moment of metamorphosis that made Hitler- Hitler”. Rosenbaum, Ron, *Explaining...*, op. cit., xiv.

<sup>11</sup> Jetzinger, Frantz, *Hitlers Jugend: Phantasien, Lügen- und die Wahrheit* (Vienna, 1996). English translation by Lawrence Wilson, *Hitler’s Youth*. London, Hutchinson & Co., 1958.

<sup>12</sup> Kubizek, August, *Adolf Hitler, mein Jugendfreund* (Graz und Göttingen, 1953). English edition: *Young Hitler: The Story of Our Friendship* (London, 1954); American edition: *The Young Hitler I Knew*, translated by E. V. Anderson (Cambridge, Riverside Press, 1955). Subsequent citations are to the American edition, which is hereinafter cited as Kubizek).

<sup>13</sup> H. R. Trevor-Roper, *Introduction to ibid.*, xii-xiii.

<sup>14</sup> Lukacs, John, *The Hitler...*, op. cit., 15 (Hereinafter cited as Lukacs).

<sup>15</sup> *Der Frühgeschichte der NSDAP: Hitlers Weg bis 1924* (Frankfort, 1965); *Hitlers Mein Kampf* (1966); *Adolf Hitler: Legende, Mythos, Wirklichkeit* (1971); and *Hitler: Briefe und Notizen* (1973).

<sup>16</sup> Lukacs, John, *The Hitler...*, op. cit., 15.

<sup>17</sup> Toland, John, *Adolf Hitler*. Garden City, Doubleday, 1976, ix. See also id., *Captured by history*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1997, 298, where Toland comments after he interviewed a man in Urfahr who had known Hitler well, "As I left him [I] wondered why no one else had never tried to interview him".

<sup>18</sup> Hamann, Brigitta, *Hitlers Wien: Lehrjahres eines Diktators*. München, Piper Verlag, 1996. Translated by Thomas Thornton: *Hitler's Vienna: A Dictator's Apprenticeship*. New York and London, Oxford University Press, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> This is precisely the claim of Yehuda Bauer.; see Rosenbaum, Ron, *Explaining...*, op. cit., xv.

<sup>20</sup> Trevor-Roper, H. R., "The Mind of Adolf Hitler", published as the Introduction to *Hitler's Secret Conversations 1941-1944*. New York, Farrar, Straus & Young, 1953, vii. Also published in England as the introduction to *Hitler's Table Talk*, vii. This as well as the following quotations are all from the same page.

<sup>21</sup> While there have been more than a hundred biographies of Hitler published, only a handful are regarded as major, researched biographies. See the review of Hitler scholarship in Chapter I of Lukacs.

<sup>22</sup> Shirer, William L., *Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent 1934-1941*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1943.

<sup>23</sup> Id., *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. New York, Simon & Shuster, 1960, ix of the Foreword; subsequent quotations in the text are found on the same page.

<sup>24</sup> Lukacs, John, *The Hitler...*, op. cit., 13.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>26</sup> Fest, Joachim, *Hitler*. Verlag Ullstein, 1973. Translated by Richard and Clara Winston and published in the United States (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974, 3). All subsequent citations are to the American edition, which is hereinafter cited as Fest.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>28</sup> Stern, Fritz, *Hitler: The Führer and the People*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1975, 12.

<sup>29</sup> Toland, John, *Adolf Hitler...*, op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> Id., *Captured...*, op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> Id., *Adolf Hitler...*, op. cit., x.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Waite, Robert G. L., *The Psychopathic God: Adolf Hitler*. New York, Basic Books, 1977; and Binion, Rudolf, *Hitler among the Germans*. New York, Elsevier, 1976.

<sup>33</sup> For example, Sebastian Haffner's, *Anmerkungen zu Hitler*. Munich, Kindler, 1978.

<sup>34</sup> Broszat, Martin; Friedländer, Saul, "A Controversy about the Historicization of National Socialism", in Peter Baldwin (ed.), *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historian's Debate*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1990, 127. This article, which consists of correspondence between its authors, is reprinted from *Yad Vashem Studies*, 19 (1988), 1-47, and *New German Critique*, 44 (Spring/Summer 1988), 85-126.

<sup>35</sup> Bracher, Karl Dietrich, "The Role of Hitler: Perspectives of Interpretation", in Laqueur, Walter

(ed.), *Fascism: A Reader's Guide: Analysis, Interpretations, Bibliography*. Berkeley, University of California, 1976, 212.

<sup>36</sup> Fest, Joachim, "Encumbered Remembrance: The Controversy about the Incomparability of National-Socialist Mass Crimes", in *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler?*, translated by James Knowlton and Truett Cates (Atlantic Highlands, Humanities Press, 1993, 71). This article originally appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 29 August, 1986.

<sup>37</sup> Nolte, Ernst, "The Past that Will Not Pass: A Speech that Could Be Written but Not Delivered", in *Forever...*, op. cit., This article originally appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6 June, 1986.

<sup>38</sup> Kershaw, Ian, *Hitler: Hubris 1889-1936*. New York, W. W. Norton, 1998, xxiv.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., xxv.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., xxvi.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., xxv.

<sup>42</sup> Rosenbaum, Ron, *Explaining...*, op. cit., xii.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., xv and xvi.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 67, quoting H. R. Trevor-Roper.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted by Robert Cecil in *The Myth of the Master Race: Alfred Rosenberg and Nazi Ideology*. New York, Dodd, Mead & Co., 1972, 96; citing K. Hayer, *Wenn die Gotter den Tempel verlassen* (Freiburg, 1947), 105.

<sup>46</sup> Rosenbaum, Ron, *Explaining...*, op. cit., xv, quoting Yehuda Bauer.