

# Hitler's *Mein Kampf*

## A blueprint for genocide?

Neil Gregor

Did Hitler always intend to exterminate Europe's Jews?

Key concept

### Causation; significance

#### Before you read this

The best thing is to read some of *Mein Kampf*, which is still in print or available on the internet. It is an important text of twentieth-century history, but be aware of the neo-Nazi internet sites, which will try to take you further into Nazi thinking than you might wish to go.

In 1924, during his imprisonment after the failed **Munich Beer Hall Putsch**, Hitler sat down to outline the foundations of his world view. The result was the infamous work, *Mein Kampf*, which was printed and circulated by the million throughout the period of the Third Reich. It expressed a simple set of themes — the need to revive Germany from its weakened state following the First World War and the need to remove the influence of the Jews from German life — to which Hitler returned time and time again over the course of his political career. Indeed, in the very last statement of his views, the so-called Last Will and Testament of 1945 composed shortly before his suicide, he repeated many of the central ideas of *Mein Kampf* once more. This shows how fixed his views were throughout the course of his political life, and how central they were to his politics in general.

Yet for the last 30 years or so, historians have been very cautious when deciding how far they should see in *Mein Kampf* a guide to Hitler's intentions once he came to power. Certainly, only a small number have been willing to argue that there is a straight line to be drawn from *Mein Kampf*

**Munich Beer Hall Putsch:** failed attempt by Hitler to take power in the state of Bavaria in 1923, preparatory to a march on Berlin.

**Darwinian struggle:** the Nazis were much attracted to the theory of Charles Darwin that life developed as a result of natural selection, in which only the fittest survived. When applied to humans, this was sometimes called Social Darwinism.

to the horrors of the extermination camps at Auschwitz and elsewhere. Most have come to the view that the book is so badly written and so poorly argued — it contains many inconsistencies and sometimes even seems to contradict itself — that we should see in it only the most general statement of Hitler's opinions and ambitions, not a detailed guide to his future plans.

In this article I consider some of the ways in which historians might best approach the problem of interpreting *Mein Kampf*, and try to draw some conclusions about its significance. It is important to bear in mind at all times that there are genuine difficulties of interpretation, which mean that there can be no definitive answer to the question. Historians and students have to judge for themselves.

### Hitler's style

Perhaps the most obvious place to start interpreting the book is with a consideration of the title itself, which translates as *My Struggle* or *My Fight*. This suggests two things. First, that Hitler wanted his book to be understood as an autobiography. This is indeed how the book is written. The first chapters describe his early life and his years spent in Vienna before the First World War, before going on to give an account of his experiences during the war. The remainder gives a history of the early years of the Nazi movement, and Hitler's involvement in it, leading up to the time it was written.

The autobiographical descriptions are often inaccurate. This in itself tells us something about Hitler's character — that he was impatient with detail. Such an attitude could be seen later in the ways in which he eventually governed the Third Reich. However, when we look at the overall image Hitler tried to paint of himself in *Mein Kampf*: of a dynamic, uncompromising revolutionary young politician who was destined to lead the country to revival and greatness, we can see that his book

served an important political end. At this time, he was still trying to assert his dominance over the Nazi party and, in offering such an account of his own dynamism, he was suggesting that he was the natural Führer (leader) of the movement and of the nation. So, on one level, the style of the book served a purpose in the internal struggles of the Nazi movement in the 1920s.

Second, the word 'struggle' is itself highly significant. It introduces us to one of Hitler's central beliefs — that life was a struggle for existence, in which the strong survived and the weak went under. This was true of individuals, which is precisely why he painted himself in such strong terms. However, he believed that it was equally true of nations, or races (as he saw it). For Hitler, life was a form of **Darwinian struggle**, in which no mercy could be shown. Just as in the animal kingdom, in which cats kill mice and foxes kill geese, human nature demands that the struggle be fought to the death. One did not pardon one's enemies or help them to their feet once they were defeated: one destroyed them.

This, in turn, alerts us to another central characteristic of Hitler's writing, which is evident on almost every page and which, indeed, is also present in the title of the book — it was exceptionally violent. The entire book talks not of 'persuading' opponents, but of 'annihilating', 'eradicating', 'destroying' and 'exterminating' them. Given what happened later, we should surely pause to consider the significance of Hitler's use of these words.

Some historians have seen Hitler's use of such terms as mere figures of speech, which suggested only a radical but very general desire to remove the influence of the Jews from German life. It is undoubtedly true that when Hitler talked in the 1920s of 'eradicating' the Jews he did not have Auschwitz in mind as such. All historians agree that the plans for the extermination camps emerged much later.

However, we should also remember that such violent talk in the 1920s reflected the direct experiences of people like Hitler in the First World War. When Hitler talked about 'destroying' and 'eradicating' the enemy, we must bear in mind that he had witnessed such activities as an ordinary soldier on the Western Front from 1914 to 1918. In other words, there is reason to believe that he meant it more literally, even if he did not necessarily have detailed plans for the extermination camps. He may not have known how he was going to kill the Jews, but it is not necessarily going too far to say that he intended to kill them somehow.

### Hitler's beliefs

So the style and the language of the book have a great deal to tell us in themselves. However, can we go further and see a clear set of ideas being expressed? Arguably we can, but only on a very

#### Key points

- *Mein Kampf* was written as an autobiographical account while Hitler was in prison following the Munich Putsch.
- Hitler used it to present himself as a dynamic, uncompromising leader figure.
- It is badly written, so that historians often struggle to interpret its details.
- However, we can still draw many conclusions which enable us to see links to policies Hitler pursued when he came to power.
- It shows Hitler to have been a man of extreme violence.
- The core of its implicitly genocidal message is in the biological images Hitler used to describe Germany's situation.

## Questions

- Is Gregor right to say that the inaccuracies in *Mein Kampf* show that Hitler was impatient about details?
- How strong is Gregor's case that Hitler meant his violent language literally?
- Does Hitler's use of medical metaphor mean that he actually intended to kill the Jews of Germany? And what about Jews outside Germany?
- Was *Mein Kampf* a blueprint for genocide?

general level.

As we have already noted, Hitler drew comparisons between the animal world and the human world. This biological understanding of human affairs was at the heart of all of his beliefs and was crucial in shaping the future development of the Nazi regime. Indeed, the most important thing to understand when trying to make sense of the nature of Hitler's anti-Semitic views is that he believed that all nations, including the Germans, functioned like human bodies. When they were strong and healthy, they survived and prospered. When they were weakened by illness, they collapsed and died.

For Hitler, the Jews played the role of the illness in the German body. Unsurprisingly, he often described them as 'bacteria', 'poison', 'cancer' or 'tuberculosis'. He believed that they had gained too much influence in German society and politics and that this had undermined Germany's ability to fight in the First World War. Weakened by internal illness, Germany had collapsed and succumbed to the **left-wing revolution of 1918**, which Hitler blamed on the Jews. As a result, Germany had had to accept a democratic system of government, which Hitler believed was incapable of solving the country's problems.

Hitler did not just employ biological or medical images when he described Germany's problems. He also saw the solutions to Germany's situation in these same medical terms. The way to revive the patient was, clearly, to remove the illness, so the way to revive the nation was to remove the Jews. And just as 'cancers' or 'parasites' could not be merely kept at bay, but had to be destroyed, so, it follows logically, it was impossible to be content with simply putting Jews in their place: they, too, had to be destroyed. In other words, the biological basis of Hitler's world view was such that removing the influence of the Jews could not be simply a matter of forcing them out of Germany or discriminating against them by turning them into second-class citizens: it demanded their literal destruction.

This way of looking at Hitler's writings enables us to overcome the difficulties of interpretation to which some historians have pointed. On the one

### Weblink

The full text of *Mein Kampf* is available in a number of different downloadable versions:

[www.hitler.org/writings/Mein\\_Kampf/](http://www.hitler.org/writings/Mein_Kampf/) or [www.crusader.net/texts/mk/](http://www.crusader.net/texts/mk/) will both give you access, though be warned — it is not a gripping read. If your heart sinks at having to plough through the whole text, there is a useful outline, with selected quotations, at

[www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/rlsa01hitler/kampf.htm](http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/rlsa01hitler/kampf.htm)

Probably the most useful source is *Wikipedia*, which gives an outline of both the ideas and the history of the book itself, so you can trace its influence through its different versions:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mein\\_Kampf](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mein_Kampf)

### left-wing revolution of 1918:

attempt by the Communist 'Spartakists', led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, to seize power in Berlin at the end of the First World War. The fact that Karl Marx and some of the leading Russian communists were Jewish led many people to link communism with the Jews.

hand, it enables us to recognise that *Mein Kampf* is indeed so poorly written that it is next to impossible to spot a detailed set of plans for the invasion of other countries or the murder of the Jews. In this sense, historians are right to argue that we should not look for a timetable or a clearly defined set of individual policies in *Mein Kampf*. On the other hand, once we recognise the centrality of the biological interpretation of human affairs to Hitler's world view, we can see that there was a horrific logic which pointed to genocide as the ultimate outcome.

### Conclusions

As we have seen, *Mein Kampf* reveals a great deal about Hitler and his world view, even if its bad style makes it impossible to interpret in close detail. It shows Hitler to have been a self-appointed man of destiny, with an uncompromising vision of himself as the leader of the new, revived nation. It shows him to have been a man of extreme violence; as we have argued, the violent language he used was itself highly telling. It shows him to have been a radical visionary thinker whose overarching belief in life as a struggle between life and death led him to see the German nation as a country with an illness in need of a cure. The cause of the illness was, for

Hitler, the Jews. Curing Germany of its illness and overcoming its weakness therefore demanded the eradication of the Jews.

*Mein Kampf* may have been vague about many things, but its overall implications were very clear. The warning was there for those who wished to heed it.

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### Further reading

Fest, J. (1973) *Hitler*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson. A biography of Hitler which offers a different view of the significance of Hitler's writings from Kershaw's below.

Gregor, N. (2005) *How to Read Hitler*, Granta. Gives a more in-depth analysis of Hitler's main writings.

Jäckel, E. (1972) *Hitler's World View: A Blueprint for Power*, Middletown. An older introduction to Hitler.

Kershaw, I. (1998) *Hitler, 1889–1936: Hubris*, Allen Lane. See note for Fest.

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