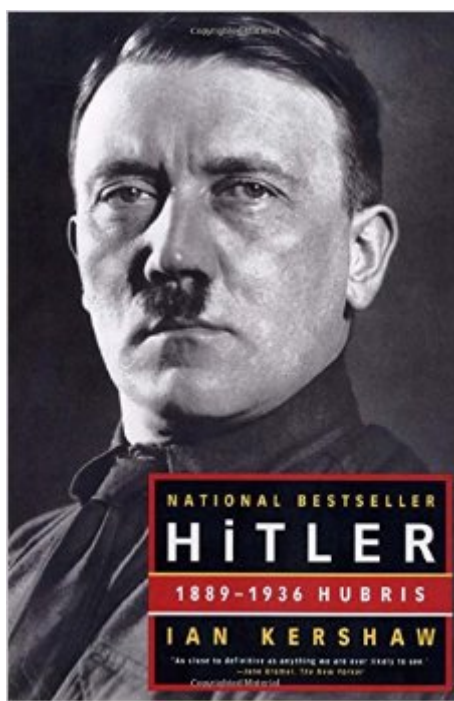


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Hitler: 1889-1936 Hubris



Synopsis

Hailed as the most compelling biography of the German dictator yet written, Ian Kershaw's *Hitler* brings us closer than ever before to the heart of its subject's immense darkness. From his illegitimate birth in a small Austrian village to his fiery death in a bunker under the Reich chancellery in Berlin, Adolf Hitler left a murky trail, strewn with contradictory tales and overgrown with self-created myths. One truth prevails: the sheer scale of the evils that he unleashed on the world has made him a demonic figure without equal in this century. Ian Kershaw's *Hitler* brings us closer than ever before to the character of the bizarre misfit in his thirty-year ascent from a Viennese shelter for the indigent to uncontested rule over the German nation that had tried and rejected democracy in the crippling aftermath of World War I. With extraordinary vividness, Kershaw recreates the settings that made Hitler's rise possible: the virulent anti-Semitism of prewar Vienna, the crucible of a war with immense casualties, the toxic nationalism that gripped Bavaria in the 1920s, the undermining of the Weimar Republic by extremists of the Right and the Left, the hysteria that accompanied Hitler's seizure of power in 1933 and then mounted in brutal attacks by his storm troopers on Jews and others condemned as enemies of the Aryan race. In an account drawing on many previously untapped sources, Hitler metamorphoses from an obscure fantasist, a "drummer" sounding an insistent beat of hatred in Munich beer halls, to the instigator of an infamous failed putsch and, ultimately, to the leadership of a ragtag alliance of right-wing parties fused into a movement that enthralled the German people. This volume, the first of two, ends with the promulgation of the infamous Nuremberg laws that pushed German Jews to the outer fringes of society, and with the march of the German army into the Rhineland, Hitler's initial move toward the abyss of war. Black-and-white photos throughout

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Customer Reviews

This superb book draws the reader closer to understanding this historically enigmatic and often bizarre human being who so changed the world of the 20th century. Although there are a myriad of such books that have appeared in the half-century since Hitler's demise in the dust and rubble of Berlin, this particular effort, which draws from hundreds of secondary sources, many of which have never before been cited, paints an authentic and masterful portrait of Hitler as an individual. This is an absolutely singular historical work; and it will almost certainly displace other, older tomes as the standard text on the early life and rise of Adolph Hitler. Although I must confess that I intensely dislike reading through the early years of most biographies as depicted in so many other treatments of famous individuals, I loved reading this particular book. Kershaw takes a quite different and novel approach, and it is one I enjoyed. Here, by carefully locating and fixing the individual in the context and welter of his times, it yields a much more enlightening approach toward painting a meaningful comprehensive picture of how a neglected and conflicted boy meaningfully became such a terribly flawed and troubled man. Thus, we see the boy grow and change in whatever fashion into a man, tracing the rise of this troubled malcontent from the anonymity of Viennese shelters to a fiery and meteoric rise into politics, culminating in his ascent to rule Germany. Kershaw memorably recreates the social, economic, and political circumstances that bent and twisted Hitler so fatefully for the history of the world.

This is a solid but unspectacular study of Hitler--hardly the definitive account trumpeted by its publisher and by some reviewers here. Many reviewers have commented on how many sources--including primary ones--that the author turns to. I had the opposite reaction. To be sure, there is a huge bibliography and many notes (more on these later) but I saw, as someone trained in history, a lot of padding here. Perhaps more surprising is how frequently Kershaw turns to a handful of works to guide him--and these are almost always secondary ones. For instance, on the question of the role of big business in Hitler's rise to power, Kershaw relies almost exclusively on Turner's Big Business. Maddeningly in the text, (Chapter 10, p. 392 in the paperback version) he writes that on 19 November, "the Reich President (Hindenburg) was handed a petition carrying 20 signatures from businessmen demanding the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor." Yet Kershaw fails to mention

who these businessmen were and in the footnote he provides no further information about them, only that the document is printed elsewhere. This is not terribly helpful for the reader. Also, Kershaw relies a great deal on Goebbels notebook accounts of Hitler, sometimes almost exclusively, but Goebbels the supreme sycophant is hardly the most reliable observer. Returning to the problem of footnotes in Kershaw's study, there is much, much information in the notes that should have been incorporated into the text. For instance, the whole account of the Reichstag fire (weak in the text) is fleshed out in more detail in the footnotes. Numerous other examples of this abound: Kershaw simply has a poor notion of what should be read in the text and what should be in the footnotes.

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