



## The Significance of *Mein Kampf*

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## The Significance of *Mein Kampf*

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### ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the publication history in German and other languages of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in the light of the critical edition of its text published in German in 2016. It addresses as well the sources that appear to have influenced Hitler in writing the text and investigates in how far the book was read by those who acquired it. It also reflects on the reasons why the text would have resonated among its readership.

**KEYWORDS** Adolf Hitler; *Mein Kampf*; Nazis; Second World War; right-wing extremism

From July 2012 until the publication of the critical edition in January 2016, Andreas Wirsching and I were jointly responsible for directing the project of the critical edition of *Mein Kampf* (MK) at the Institute for Contemporary History (Institut für Zeitgeschichte).<sup>1</sup> I worked closely with the editorial team led by Christian Hartmann as well as the book designer Rudolf Paulus Gorbach and a number of people at other institutions. Before I joined the Institute, I had regularly dealt with the text from an analytical research perspective, writing about it and giving lectures since the 1980s. Since 2012 and after the publication of the Critical Edition, the public interest and the number of lectures increased significantly. Both in Germany and internationally—from Paris through Birmingham to Moscow—, a wide variety of institutions wanted to discuss the text as such and the critical edition in particular. Thus, the following remarks summarize and reflect and analyze facts, whose background can be found in the introduction to the Critical Edition, its more than 3,500 annotations, some of my earlier publications, and my lectures.

Nonetheless, the arrangement of the following text on the significance of MK is conceptualized anew. The structure is based on guiding questions about relevant topics that were formulated by *The Historian*. The questions are incorporated in a way that they serve as landmarks for the argumentation and make the text readable as one consecutive analytical description.

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<sup>1</sup>Christian Hartmann, Thomas Vordermayer, Othmar Plöckinger and Roman Töppel, eds, *Hitler, Mein Kampf. Eine kritische Edition*, in collaboration with Pascal Trees, Angelika Reizle and Martina Seewald-Mooser [commissioned by the Institute of Contemporary History Munich-Berlin], 2 vols, fourteenth ed., Munich 2024 [2016].

One of the central questions about *MK* is, how much people read it, both when it was published and after the Nazi take-over. To answer this we must distinguish between how many copies were sold and how many were read. When the first volume was published on 18 July 1925 it was comparatively expensive (12 Marks). But the 10,000 copies of the first edition of that volume were sold within a few months; a second edition went into print in December 1925. When the second volume was published on 10 December 1926 also with 10,000 copies for a start, it did not have the same success but was still a comparatively well-selling book if we take into account the rather high price. The second edition of the second volume and the third edition of the first volume came out in 1929.

The first volume had been announced several times and the publishing date postponed repeatedly. The text was to a large extent the product of Hitler's 264 days in Landsberg prison. He lived there as if lodged in a hotel from 1 April to 20 December 1924. The conditions were so relaxed that he could welcome 345 visitors in 524 appointments and had full access to all materials he needed, be it personal food items, paper, and other material provided for a rather normal life. He was constantly supported by his fans and followers in all ways that he required.

Hitler started to write *Mein Kampf* in May/June 1924. A project of this size was new to him, but not writing as such. On 1 January 1921, Hitler had published his first article in the *Völkischer Beobachter* of which the title translates into English as "The Folkish Idea and the Party." Since then, many of his speeches had been published in his political party's newspaper. Until June 1921, another circa forty essays were published under his name before he stopped writing for some time. In 1922, though, Hitler produced several texts which he later used in some parts for chapters of *MK*.<sup>2</sup> He was both recognized as a speaker and as an author and was familiar with producing texts for the wider public. But he was not thought of as the author of a full-length book, let alone of two volumes which together amounted to 780 pages.

Since Landsberg prison was a rather comfortable place, he was able to focus on the project over several months. This was a new experience for the 35-year-old uneducated political agitator. Until then, Hitler's life had been characterized by restlessness, activism, and failure. Hitler later spoke of the time in prison as a proxy for the university education he never had. In fact, he was given the opportunity to summarize and structure his life experiences for

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. Othmar Plöckinger, *Geschichte eines Buches. Adolf Hitlers "Mein Kampf" 1922–1945*, Munich: Oldenbourg, second ed. 2011, 11–20; Florian Beierl and Othmar Plöckinger, "Neue Dokumente zu Hitlers Buch *Mein Kampf*", in *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte [VfZ]* 57 (2009): 261–313, 292–4.

the first time and construct it to an autobiographical narrative that made him look like the embodiment of a political prophecy.

The second volume was written in 1925 and 1926 with some interruption, mostly in Berchtesgaden and in the so-called Kampfhäusl on the Obersalzberg. Hitler was known as a very dynamic and active political speaker, but hindered by a ban from 9 March 1925 to 5 March 1927 to speak in public. In writing he found therefore an outlet to express his ideas during this period.

The text of both books was largely produced by Hitler himself. Large parts of the first manuscript he composed on a typewriter. For the second volume, which he had already begun in Landsberg, he had a secretary at his disposal, to whom he dictated the text on the Obersalzberg and in Berchtesgaden. All along, he received assistance by some of his supporters like Josef Stolzinger-Cerny (1869-1942; from the *Völkischer Beobachter*), Rudolf Hess (1894-1987), and Hess's wife Ilse Pröhl (1900-1995). But all this help can be considered support that falls (and still does so today) within the usual practice of how such monographs are produced. Hitler was the original author who is responsible for the text and its meaning.

*MK* was written during a moment of failure, after Hitler's putsch had ended in disaster. His movement was scattered, his party was banned, and he himself was looking forward to years of imprisonment. Through this imposed ban on political activism and the prohibition on public speaking that followed, Hitler had more time at his hands than was to be expected for an ambitious politician. He used this opportunity to produce the two volumes of his book which made him a recognized author. Particularly his supporters, regarded it as an achievement that he, as a relatively young politician, had produced almost 800 pages of autobiography and political ideology. People from now on could refer to it if they wanted to do so. It could be used as a reference point from the time when Hitler resumed his constantly agitating in his efforts as a proselytizing politician aiming for the political breakthrough of his party.

The price of twelve *Reichsmarks* for each of the two volumes constituted some obstacle to their widespread circulation among the hundreds of thousands of followers whom the *NSDAP* attracted in 1929 and 1930. From 7 May 1930 onward, both volumes were combined as a so-called "people's edition" for eight *Reichsmarks* in one volume. When we speak of *MK* today, people usually think of that one-volume book. That is the reason that a third manuscript, which Hitler had written in 1928 but not published at the time, is known as Hitler's *Zweites Buch* (*Second Book*). It was detected after the war and published in 1961 by Gerhard Weinberg.<sup>3</sup> In 1995, this text was updated

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<sup>3</sup>Gerhard L. Weinberg, ed., *Hitlers Zweites Buch: Ein Dokument aus dem Jahr 1928*, Stuttgart: DVA, 1961 [English translation: *Hitler's Second Book: The Unpublished Sequel to Mein Kampf*, New York: Enigma, 2003].

and republished by the Institute for Contemporary History (in cooperation with its original editor) as part of the new critical edition of all of Hitler's writings from before 1933.<sup>4</sup> Due to copyright questions, it was decided that "Hitler's Second Book" should not appear anew under that heading. Instead the text received the rather technocratic title *Außenpolitische Standortbestimmung nach der Reichstagswahl Juni-Juli 1928* (*Foreign Policy Clarification after the Parliamentary Election June-July 1928*).

Before 1932, more than 200,000 copies of *MK* were sold. This was a high level of distribution for a political book at the time. But subsequently sales increased significantly. From the beginning of 1932 and in the period immediately after Hitler became chancellor in January 1933 around one million copies were sold. This rapid increase happened out of a growing interest among the German public without any coercion being applied or, as was to occur later, without the help of official campaigns by the state. There was also a significant number of copies that were borrowed from public libraries, which further indicates a high level of interest.<sup>5</sup> In sum, this success made *MK* a widely diffused and well-known book by the end of 1933. It not only made Hitler highly recognizable as a political ideologue but also earned him a considerable sum of money.

The text's success continued with official and state support during the years of Nazi rule. Certainly, editions continued to be bought and given away without being read, or merely marginally being read. But *MK*'s early success alone and the large number of later editions and copies distributed show that the book was disseminated and its message understood at a far higher rate than many of its target audience, the German public, would have us subsequently believe. The American military administration conducted two representative surveys in their occupation zone in February 1946 and November 1947.<sup>6</sup> In 1946, seven percent of the interviewees claimed to have read the book in full and a further 16 percent had read parts of it. In 1947, the figures went down to five percent for the entire text and 14 percent for partial reading. We should keep in mind that this was during a time when no one could expect to gain any positive response for honestly admitting to

<sup>4</sup>Gerhard L. Weinberg, Christian Hartmann, and Klaus A. Lankheit, eds, *Außenpolitische Standortbestimmung nach der Reichstagswahl, Juni-Juli 1928 (Reden, Schriften, Anordnungen, Bd. II A)*, Munich: Saur, 1995.

<sup>5</sup>Othmar Plöckinger, *Geschichte eines Buches*, 203–444; Angelika Königseder, "Mein Kampf": Entstehung und Verbreitung bis 1945, in *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 60 (2012): 898–906; Othmar Plöckinger, "Mein Kampf": Ein ungelesener Bestseller?, in *Die Zeit* 49 (2015), 3 December 2015, 21; Sven Felix Kellerhoff, *„Mein Kampf“. Die Karriere eines deutschen Buches*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2015; Roman Töppel, "Volk und Rasse". Hitlers Quellen auf der Spur, in *VfZ* 64 (2016): 1–35.

<sup>6</sup>Archive of the Institute for Contemporary History, Munich, MA 1304, Surveys Section, Report No. 2, Intelligence Branch, ICD, OMGUS, USFET, Who in Germany has read "Mein Kampf"?, roll 1; Report No. 92, 9 February 1948, ICD Opinion Surveys, OMGUS, APO 742, Berlin, Germany, Readers of "Mein Kampf," roll 2.

reading *MK*'s pages. In other words, there is little doubt that millions of Germans had read the book either in full or in considerable parts. In essence, the claim often made of *MK* being an "unread bestseller" is misleading, a trivialization of its significance in the interests of those who did not want to reflect on their responsibility after the failure of National Socialism.

What can we say about how its contents were diffused and digested? National Socialism saw itself as a missionary political movement, based on activism and the show of force and energy. Any idea of a "closer reading" of Hitler's text was alien to the Nazi concept of politics. Hitler despised intellectuals and even any idea of thoughtful reflection about his arguments. He was convinced that the repetition of core phrases and simplistic concepts of "friend vs foe" or "us vs them" were at the heart of any political movement aiming for success and the acquisition of the levers of power. Thus National Socialists should not debate or contemplate in study circles or critically engage in other, similar kinds of dialogue and discourse. They should impress through the wielding of political propaganda and strive for power through action and the projection of force.

The preferred way to conduct political propaganda was by means of public speeches, newspaper articles, and the constant show of militarized force by members, particularly by the storm troopers (*SA: Sturmabteilung*). This is what Hitler propagated in his speeches; it is the undercurrent of *MK* as well. The basic message of *MK* was rather simple: I am the savior of the German-Aryan people sent by Providence and you, readers and listeners, should follow my political movement so that we can acquit our historical duties. These are the unification of the Aryan Germans along racial terms and the end of the democratic and parliamentary political system by the establishment of the Führer state with me, Adolf Hitler, as the one who shall be identified throughout this process as the obvious leader. Then the establishment of a racial state will follow that shall include all Germans along the line of my racial worldview, including those not living within the German borders at the moment, and shall exclude all those regarded as either not belonging to the German race or even seen as hostile races that have to be fought and destroyed, particularly "the Jews."

This is the concept of domestic policy that continually surfaces in the political propaganda emphasizing the concept of "rebuilding unity," which meant establishing a racist social order. In foreign policy, it meant the revocation of everything to do with the Versailles Treaty (*Diktat*, as Hitler called it) and the reestablishment of the German *Reich* as a great power. It also meant immediate rearmament and strategic provision for the violent

“struggle of the races,” which in consequence meant the preparation for a race war.

At the core is the understanding that Hitler wanted what he regarded as racial unity and on the basis of this racial unity to conquer “living space in the East” and “the destruction of the Jews.” All this is laid out in *MK* in reverberating formulations that can be condensed time and again to the same core of ideological axioms and political aims. These are also the reverberating topics of the political propaganda and the speeches provided by Hitler and his supporters in their everyday political efforts until 1933 (and beyond).

For all those who were potential followers with a similar simplistic worldview of “friend or foe,” the style with Hitler’s often ferocious rhetoric (“brutal,” “fight,” “endless struggle,” “right or wrong,” or “fanatic” are just a few) and biologicistic vocabulary (“living space,” “eradicate”) was enthralling. They were taken by the vision of the promised political salvation of Germany becoming great again. These followers did not read the text with a critical analysis in mind but with admiration for the clarity of the message and the rigid conviction and fierce dogmatism of the author. Hitler regularly claims and proposes the “conviction of the right to use even the most brutal weapons” and “a fanatical belief in the necessity of the victory of a revolutionary new order.”<sup>7</sup> And he asserts that,

If you want to live, fight, and if you do not want to fight in this world of eternal struggle, you do not deserve to live. Even if this were hard, it is just the way it is.<sup>8</sup>

For the potential adepts, Hitler was fascinating in his strong-mindedness and will to political power as expressed here in *MK*.

The text regularly repeats a jumble of pseudo-knowledge, vague experiences, and mere assertions; its “arguments” are commonly disjointed and illogical. An experienced copy editor could easily design a much more lucid structure and summarize the book’s core content to 100 or 150 pages. But Hitler’s followers did not mind this rambling. They found what they were looking for, the ideological convictions of a young political leader whose public rhetoric and presentation they found so convincing in everyday propaganda that from very early on he was able to channel their deep-rooted longing for a right-wing-savior.

What are in this perspective the important influences from authoritarian and racist theoreticians such as Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882), H.S.

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<sup>7</sup>*Mein Kampf* (Critical Edition), Chapter II/9, 180; more similar examples can easily be found with a word search in the online edition: available at: <https://www.mein-kampf-edition.de/>, accessed 6 January 2025. The page and chapter references in this article according to the printed version as in fn 1.

<sup>8</sup>*Mein Kampf* (Critical Edition), Chapter I/11, 305.

Chamberlain (1855-1927), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) or Oswald Spengler (1880-1936)? In the sense of irrationality, his authoritarian approach, and his preference for swirling feelings and mood over rationally or logically structured thinking, Hitler's text follows a path of a very "German" tradition. The "ideas of 1914" had argued on a higher philosophical level against the "rationality" of "the West," but their streak of anti-logical sentiment was often similar to what Hitler maintained. Hitler's theories of history, politics, and mankind were an amalgamation of what he was able to combine as reflections of common and wide-spread ideological constructions. We should not assume that Hitler was in any way an original thinker, let alone producer of intellectual concepts. He was not. He was a summarizer and amalgamator along the lines of repetitive ideological core axioms. When in May 1931 Joseph Goebbels (1897-1945), Berlin's *Gauleiter* and an academically trained literature expert who was to become Reich minister of education and propaganda in 1933, read *MK*, he noted in his diary that

... the book sounds honest and brave. Only the style is sometimes loathsome. You have to be very broad-minded for it. He writes as he speaks. It sounds with immediate impact, but also often unsophisticated.<sup>9</sup>

Starting with the foreword, Hitler himself claims several times that any historical movement has come to fruition not through great authors, but through great orators.<sup>10</sup>

When one reads *MK* it becomes obvious time and again that Hitler's intellectual horizon is narrow. His references to philosophical or intellectual concepts are first and foremost an instrument to repeat his core assumptions and ideological axioms. What really is original is his aggressive missionary zeal and his ability to create a following for his convictions through the constant repetition of his core arguments.

As for the influence of classical German authors, it may be noted that Hitler regularly uses proverbs, preferably from the Middle Ages, phrases derived from Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, as well as from nineteenth-century philosophers, particularly from Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche. He uses William Shakespeare's "To be or not to be" six times, but always puts it in a militaristic or Social-Darwinist sense of a fundamental meaning rather than engaging with *Hamlet*.

Hitler's central conviction for all reflections on history, politics, and society is his belief to have identified the law of human existence and its determining

<sup>9</sup>*Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, ed. Elke Fröhlich, part I: *Aufzeichnungen, 1923-1941*, vol. 2/1: December 1929 to May 1931, ed. Anne Munding, Munich: Saur 2005, 403 (10 May 1931).

<sup>10</sup>Cf. *Mein Kampf* (Critical Edition), Foreword, v; chapter I/3, 110; chapter II/6, 117.



principle that all history is nothing but a sequence of racial struggles. Hitler thus stands in a tradition of “theories of race” that had developed since the mid-nineteenth century. These constructions go back to the amalgamation of theories by Arthur de Gobineau, which were combined with the findings of Charles Darwin on evolution. While Gobineau placed the so-called Aryan at the top of a hierarchy of races, Charles Darwin’s theories in *The Origin of Species* were misused to develop theories of an unavoidable and constant struggle among human beings. Although this had neither been intended by Darwin nor had any foundation in his original concepts, these theories about the survival of the fittest became popular as Social Darwinism. We know how these racist concepts served as justifications for territorial conquest and colonial rule in the age of imperialism. Through the impact of the First World War they underwent further radicalization, becoming comprehensive racist models driven by an absolutist claim. According to these models, the “cultural-creative purity of the Aryan race” and its alleged superiority based on natural law were existentially endangered by racial mixing.<sup>11</sup> Julius Langbehn (1851-1907) claimed in his widely read book on “Rembrandt as an educator” that

the whole writing of history will undergo a revolution when one first decides to investigate more thoroughly the influence of blood on the development of peoples, tribes, and human individuals. The life of peoples in the past as well as the present will then no longer be described and studied along the uncertain political boundaries, but according to the currents of blood moving with or against each other.<sup>12</sup>

Houston Stewart Chamberlain meanwhile claimed that “anyone who wants to depict and judge the history of the nineteenth century” could not escape “the question of the *races* involved in the construction of this history.”<sup>13</sup>

Thus, a series of publications can be identified as ideological influences. Most of these were written between the end of the nineteenth century and the early 1920s. This is the main background which Hitler and his readers shared. Hitler was careful not to display direct hints to his sources. He wanted to be identified as an original thinker, as a conceptualizer in his own right. But there are several exceptions where the source of Hitler’s contentions can be identified easily. One such important source is *Der Deutsche Staat auf nationaler und sozialer*

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<sup>11</sup>For the wider context, see Roman Töppel, “Volk und Rasse: In Search of Hitler’s Sources,” in Elizabeth Harvey and Johannes Hürter, eds, *Hitler—New Research*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2018 (*German Yearbook of Contemporary History* 3), 71-110; Eve Rosenhaft, “Hitler’s Antisemitism and the Horizons of the Racial State,” in *ibid.*, 111-21.

<sup>12</sup>Julius Langbehn, *Rembrandt als Erzieher*, Leipzig: Hirschfeld 1890, 316-17.

<sup>13</sup>Houston Stewart Chamberlain, “Die Rassenfrage” [1900], in *ibid.*, *Rasse und Persönlichkeit*, Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1925, 66-80, 66 [emphasis in original].

*Grundlage* (“*The German state on a national and social basis*”) by Gottfried Feder, published in 1923, to which Hitler had written a foreword.<sup>14</sup> We also know that Hitler had read Spengler’s *Decline of the West* before he wrote *MK*.<sup>15</sup> On 19 May 1924, Rudolf Hess wrote in a letter from Landsberg that the Spengler book was there “at least three times” and that Hitler was “not very pleased with him.”<sup>16</sup> This is underlined by Hitler’s remark in his speech of 1 May 1935, when, referring to Spengler’s book, he proclaimed that “it must not be the downfall of the West, but the resurrection of the peoples of this West!”<sup>17</sup>

Hitler regularly makes use of proverbs and phrases from well-known literary and philosophical works. He assumes that they are familiar to his expected readership. The use of such phrases identifies him to his readers as a somewhat learned author. The often new context and meaning in which he uses these formulations leave it open to his readers whether he can be considered an original theorist or just someone who adapts well-known phrases known to his recipients. His supporters did either not care or admired his way of conceptualizing his beliefs for political action.

The same is true for the way Hitler incorporates resolute, hard-sounding, determined, often militaristic, formulations in his writing style: Such phrasings and metaphors were familiar at least in German ultra-nationalist and folkish circles and to some degree known beyond them. The book’s language in this respect sounds strange to German readers nowadays, but we have to remind ourselves about the horizon and language of those living in the 1920s and 1930s. Texts circulating widely like Langbehn’s *Rembrandt* (1890), Houston Stewart Chamberlain’s *Arische Weltanschauung* (“*Aryan Worldview*,” 1905) and *Wenn ich der Kaiser wär*’ by Heinrich Claß (“*If I Were the Emperor*,” 1912) should be mentioned among the sources of such phrases.<sup>18</sup>

What can we say about other Nazi treatises like Alfred Rosenberg’s (1893–1946) and the influence of similar anti-Semitic publications? The crucial element of Hitler’s ideological construction was its dichotomy. Hitler took

<sup>14</sup>Gottfried Feder, *Der Deutsche Staat auf nationaler und sozialer Grundlage. Neue Wege in Staat, Finanz und Wirtschaft*, Munich: Deutschvölkische Verl.-Buchh., third ed. 1924 [1923].

<sup>15</sup>Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, vol. 1, Munich: C.H. Beck, [completely redesigned edition,] 1923 [forty-eighth ed.]; vol. 2, Munich: C.H. Beck, 1922 [English: Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality*, trans. and ed. Charles Francis Atkinson, New York: Knopf 1926].

<sup>16</sup>Rudolf Hess, *Briefe, 1908–1933*, ed. Wolf Rüdiger Heß, Munich: Langen Müller 1987, 328.

<sup>17</sup>BArch [Federal Archives Germany], R43-II/995, DNB [German News Bureau], 1 May 1935. The report by the German News Bureau on this reads in full: “One writer summarized the impressions of this time in a book which he gave the title: ‘Decline of the West’. So is this really the end of our history and thus of our peoples? No! We cannot believe it! It must not be the downfall of the West, but the resurrection of the peoples of this West! (Massive applause.)”

<sup>18</sup>Langbehn, *Rembrandt*; Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *Arische Weltanschauung*, Munich: Bruckmann 1916 [English original 1905]; Heinrich Claß, *Wenn ich der Kaiser wär*. *Politische Wahrheiten und Notwendigkeiten*, Leipzig: Dieterich, 1912.

up theories of modern anti-Semitism that had developed since Gobineau and Social Darwinism. From this perspective, Hitler saw Western democracies and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia as both being a product of “the Jews” in the “struggle of the races.” For Hitler “the Jews” constituted a “counter-race.” Democracy and Bolshevism were both sinister “Jewish” instruments of diversion from the “racial instinct.” Hitler was convinced that the “basic racial instincts” of his imagined “German-Aryan community” were still intact but would be lost if democracy, parliamentarism, or Bolshevism had their way. Thus he saw himself in the historic role to unify the “racial core” and secure it for the future. For the more focused anti-Semitic tradition the books by Theodor Fritsch (senior; 1852-1933) are important, as is Chamberlain’s *Grundlagen des Neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* and similar authors of the German anti-Semitic tradition.<sup>19</sup>

Hitler adopted theories of race and their alleged explanation of the eternal struggle not just in *MK* but as key elements of his political belief system that he constantly propagated. Hitler thus transferred the original phrases and their meaning into his own ideological context. We have to take seriously that what Hitler propagated had growing repercussions in wide areas of German nationalist discourse because of its amalgamation of anti-democratic, anti-Semitic, anti-parliamentarian, authoritarian, and militaristic concepts, which were widely shared by many Germans pre-1914 and are often construed an idealized past in the post-1918-defeat-society of the Weimar Republic.

Hitler thus imagined himself as the man with the key to world history in his hands, assigned by fate as the chosen leader to transfer this unique opportunity into political reality. He was convinced that Central Europe in the mid-1920s harbored a cohesive “racial nucleus” of at least seventy million “Aryans.” He saw it as his historical task to establish a racial state on their behalf and to ensure the domination of these “Aryans.” It was an auto-suggestive messianic self-perception that drove him to transform his ideological faith into political practice.

How can we classify what role and significance *MK* had as a book of representation and orientation for the followers of the NS movement (like the Bible for Protestants or the *Short Course* for Soviet Communists)? In the

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<sup>19</sup>Theodor Fritsch, *Antisemiten-Katechismus. Eine Zusammenstellung des wichtigsten Materials zum Verständnis der Judenfrage*, Leipzig: Fritsch, tenth ed. 1891 [1887]; later published as: *Handbuch der Judenfrage. Eine Zusammenstellung der wichtigsten Tatsachen zur Beurteilung des jüdischen Volkes*, Leipzig: Hammer-Verlag, twenty-ninth ed. 1923 (in total forty-ninth ed. 1944). Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, Munich: Bruckmann, fifth ed. 1904 [1899]. For an overview on this antisemitic tradition: Magnus Brechtken, *“Madagaskar für die Juden”. Antisemitische Idee und politische Praxis 1885-1945*, Munich: Oldenbourg, second ed. 1998 [1997], 15-79.

years immediately before, during and, with a different attitude, after the Third Reich, *MK* was sometimes compared to the Bible in terms of its meaning for Hitler and his ideology and Hitler's role for the Germans as a sort of political messiah. Victor Klemperer, in his analysis on the Language of the Third Reich, characterized it as the „Bible of National Socialism” and pointed to the fact that it circulated widely years before Hitler came to power.<sup>20</sup> When Grigorii Zinov'ev<sup>21</sup> translated *MK* into Russian, he called the book in his corresponding analysis of Hitler's text, “The Bible of the German fascists.”<sup>22</sup> This reflects that it was regarded as an iconic text in the way that people could refer to it whether they were followers or adversaries. It is also obvious that Hitler's linguistic style repeatedly used phrases and connotations from the Bible. This is not because he wanted to refer to Jewish or Christian sources but because they were well-known formulations with which his readers and listeners could immediately connect. Using formulations that were recognizable and popular signaled knowledge and pseudo-erudition as well as betraying an instinctive and calculated ability to reach out to the audience. Again, we have to keep in mind that Hitler and National Socialism saw themselves predominantly as active and fighting rather than reflective and reading. Thus, the book was an icon but not an everyday tool in the political struggle.

In any case, the ideological concepts as laid out in *MK* were apparent as objects and aims of everyday practice for followers and opponents. Everybody could easily become aware of what Hitler's convictions meant, even without reading anything in *MK*. And everyone could see how the political concepts of the text were transformed into political practice after January 1933. Nonetheless, there was (and still is) a recognition-gap when we look at how people might read *MK* and how they nonetheless did not take its ideological and programmatic concepts seriously while they themselves witnessed their realization. It is a rather astonishing observation to see a program propagated so clearly and decisively that was so often underestimated both by those who witnessed the Nazi take-over and its consequences as well as by historians.

<sup>20</sup>Klemperer, Viktor, *LTI. Notizbuch eines Philologen*, ed. Elke Fröhlich, Stuttgart: Reclam 2010 [1947], 34.

<sup>21</sup>Grigorii Zinov'ev (Zinoviev) was the party-name of Ovsei-Gershen Aronovich Radomyslsky (1883-1936), who was head of the Petrograd/Leningrad Communist Party in the Soviet Union and of the Communist International organization (*Comintern*) from 1919 to 1926. Stripped from his offices, he was eventually sent into internal exile, where he completed by 1933 a translation of *Mein Kampf* intended for the exclusive use of Soviet Communist leaders. After a showtrial in Moscow, he was executed in 1936.

<sup>22</sup>“Die Bibel der deutschen Faschisten,” in Othmar Plöckinger, ed., *Schlüsseldokumente zur internationalen Rezeption von “Mein Kampf”*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2016, 17-74; Wladislaw Hedeler, “Grigori Sinowjews Übersetzung und Kommentar zu Adolf Hitlers *Mein Kampf*,” in Othmar Plöckinger, ed., *Sprache zwischen Politik, Ideologie und Geschichtsschreibung. Analysen historischer und aktueller Übersetzungen von “Mein Kampf”*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2019, 89-105.

This leads us to the question how it was received in other countries. There were translations into at least eighteen foreign languages before 1945. It is not quite clear how many more translations have been added since then.<sup>23</sup> These translations can be roughly categorized in two ways: Those produced by Nazi-sympathizers, or people at least sympathetic to the dissemination of Hitler's ideology, and those which were motivated by an impetus to enlighten readers and foreign politicians about the key elements of Hitler's racial world view and political goals. The attitude in the selection of translated passages of abridged versions, as well as the tone of the translation and the chosen linguistic style, were shaped by either sympathy or opposition towards Hitler.

The earliest translations before 1945 were produced in the Soviet Union and the English language world. The former Comintern politician Grigorii Zinov'ev translated the book into Russian in 1933 while in internal exile in Kustanai "as a sign of loyalty to the party leadership."<sup>24</sup> But it was not published at the time, even when its text seems to have been diffused among the highest Communist Party leaders.<sup>25</sup> It took until 1992 before Zinov'ev's text was published in full, only to be banned again in 2002.<sup>26</sup>

For a translation into the English language, Hitler's publishing house attempted to sell the rights from the late 1920s onwards. In 1933 a version authorized by Eher Verlag appeared on the market, but it was an abridged version of the text, which was shortened by two thirds. Until 1939, this was the only official version that circulated on the British and North American markets.<sup>27</sup> For foreign policy reasons, "the National Socialists did everything in their power to prevent a complete English translation."<sup>28</sup> But this strategy did not succeed. To learn about what was missing in the official text, several unauthorized translations of parts which had been omitted from the authorized version were produced in Great Britain between 1933 and 1937. In North America, several unauthorized translations came out in 1939, two of which were complete translations. The last complete historical translation came out in 1943. As a result, there are four complete translations in the

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<sup>23</sup>For an overview and further context on individual translations, see Plöckinger, *Sprache*. Many of the details in this chapter are based on the introduction by Othmar Plöckinger (*ibid.*, 9-14) and the individual chapters of that book on specific translations.

<sup>24</sup>Hedeler, "Grigori Sinowjews Übersetzung," 92.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>27</sup>Stefan Baumgarten, "Sprachliche und diskursive Tendenzen einer eliminatorischen Narration: Historische englische Übersetzungen von *Mein Kampf*," in Plöckinger, *Sprache*, 51-88, 53. Baumgarten gives an exemplary detailed and differentiated picture of the English-language translations.

<sup>28</sup>Stefan Baumgarten, "Sprachliche und diskursive Tendenzen," 54.

English language (produced by James Murphy, Barrows Mussey, Helmut Ripperger, and Ralph Manheim, respectively).<sup>29</sup>

There existed, among others, a Spanish translation by a member of Bolivia's elite who had studied in Germany and had contact with leading people in Hitler's party. It is therefore no surprise that the style of his translation is in strong support of Hitler's ideological worldview.<sup>30</sup> The translator for the Dutch version was a convinced National Socialist as well. It remained the only complete Dutch translation until a new version, based on the German critical edition of 2016, was published in 2018.<sup>31</sup> In Japan, Hitler's book did not receive as much attention as one might have expected due to the collaborative foreign policy of the "Axis." The disparaging remarks in *MK* about Japanese culture were omitted. The European-Germanic worldview and the "intellectual" traditions Hitler addressed in his formulations were not familiar to most readers in Japan. Particularly, Hitler's view that anti-Semitism was the key factor for any political agenda met with rather evasive or puzzled reactions.<sup>32</sup>

Turkey constitutes an excellent example of how translations reflect a changing political atmosphere. The only Turkish translation that was produced before 1945 had a clear anti-Nazi stance. Over the past decades though, this has changed. There have been new Turkish translations in a wide variety of versions since the 1990s. Hitler thus even appeared on the Turkish bestseller lists. A ban of the book was regularly circumvented.<sup>33</sup>

How can we describe *MK*'s role in the Nazi rise to power since the late 1920s? *MK* was part of the propaganda machine of Nazism in the sense that it could be used as a reference point both for pointing to its leader and its program. Hitler had clarified his thinking about his ideological self-understanding through writing this text. He convinced himself of being the messianic leader of a racial and racist resurrection. Thus, *MK* could be used as a constant reference point and as the core text of the leader of this party of a new awakening. This was the platform from which everyday propaganda was launched and the basis from which political activism was violently pursued.

That the text is full of repetitions is neither a mishap nor an oversight by the author, but quite the opposite: For Hitler, reiterations were an established

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 53. Baumgarten analyses eleven translations into English between 1933 and 1943, some of them only a few dozen pages; see his overview in *ibid.*, 55.

<sup>30</sup>Jesus Casquete, "Die erste spanische Ausgabe von *Mein Kampf*," in Plöckinger, *Sprache*, 107-136, 107.

<sup>31</sup>Gerard Groeneveld, "*Mein Kampf* in den Niederlanden," in Plöckinger, *Sprache*, 153-69.

<sup>32</sup>Frank Jacob, "*Mein Kampf* in Japan: Einfluss, Rezeption und Übersetzungslücken?," in Plöckinger, *Sprache*, 137-51.

<sup>33</sup>Hilmi Bengi, "Die türkischen Übersetzungen von *Mein Kampf-Kavgam*," in Plöckinger, *Sprache*, 181-98.

tool of propaganda (as they are in modern advertising and political campaigning to this day). Hitler used repetitions time and again in his speeches to his several thousand listeners in Munich's Circus Krone building and similar beer hall venues.<sup>34</sup> And he claimed his view that „the masses“ would only recognize in their memory “a thousandfold repetition of the simplest concepts.”<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the repetitions are a reflection of Hitler's messianic identity as an author: He wants to bring his message home at all costs, as much as he does aim with the same sort of energetic dogmatism for the realization of his ideological imaginations.<sup>36</sup>

In the *Reichstag* election on 20 May 1928, the NSDAP received just 2.6 per cent, which gained it a mere twelve seats in parliament. The years of Hitler's speaking ban were over, but the rhetoric did not resonate as much as in the years of crisis of the early 1920s. For a brief moment, the Weimar Republic seemed stable both economically as well as politically. But Hitler pursued his missionary self-construction nonetheless and the experience of these years which led to success later was important both for Hitler's view of himself in the phases of defeat during the Second World War as well as the image it produced for his followers and many Germans in general. In the late 1920s his party already deployed three hundred speakers who staged about 20,000 events throughout the country in that year alone to propagate its ideological program. The party also established a central speakers' organization to increase their number to around one thousand. National-Socialist speakers were particularly active in the provinces and organized gatherings with several thousand people. Hitler spoke for more than two hours to crowds of thousands of people regularly. The Nazi speakers were a constant show of propagandistic force with Hitler at the heart of the political agenda and his ideology as laid out in *MK* at the core. This was combined with public marches of the party's Storm Troopers as demonstrations of force (and a readiness for violence) in the cities and in the provinces. In this sense, the basic messages from *MK*—the claim of racial unity by a core movement and the necessity to win over political power through constant active “education,” i.e., propaganda—materialized in the real world of Weimar politics. This was the propagandistic background when in the *Reichstag* elections on 14 September 1930 the NSDAP was catapulted by 6.4 million voters to 18.3 per cent of the vote, which translated into 107 members of the legislature. To a large degree, this success was the result of

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<sup>34</sup>For a recent summary see Hiroyuki Takada, *Hitlers Reden 1919-1945. Eine sprachwissenschaftliche Analyse*, Berlin: J.B. Metzler, 2024, 17-27.

<sup>35</sup>*Mein Kampf* (Critical Edition), Chapter I/6, 190 (The psychology of propaganda).

<sup>36</sup>Hitler describes his conviction of effective political propaganda in several paragraphs, particularly in his chapter on “war propaganda” in the first volume (*Mein Kampf* [Critical Edition], chapter I/6).

successful propaganda. Research estimates show that around a quarter of those who voted for the NSDAP in 1930 had not gone to the polls two years previously.

What is the link of *MK* to Nazi policies after 1933? We must remind ourselves that *MK* was written with two general perspectives in mind: As a pseudo-autobiography by Hitler to describe himself as the messiah of a revolutionary movement and as a programmatic outline of his world view and political ideology. The first was to show his followers how and why he was chosen to be the Führer of this movement. In this perspective *MK* is in essence the autobiographical narrative of Hitler's messianism. The second purpose of the text was to outline the basis and the consequences of the ideological program of his movement. Hitler refused to produce a revised and updated version of *MK* when he had reached the political power he aimed for. His worldview was about action, struggle, domination. *MK* could (and should) thus be read as a 780-page-program, not with an exact timetable but with a clear sense of aims and directions. It is quite easy to identify the axioms, claims, and concepts in its pre-1933 text and compare them to the policies of post-1933.

In *MK*, Hitler described central parameters of three imagined necessities: (a) the size of the people, (b) its space and territory, and (c) the correlated military geography. Accordingly, he deemed it necessary to increase the population and expand its territory through seizure of *Lebensraum* ("living space") in order to ensure that the military geography of the *Volksgemeinschaft* would be adequate for future conflicts. As soon as these prerequisites were safe-guarded, the "Aryan race" would have created the conditions for prevailing on a global scale. Combined with actively heightening racial consciousness and military preparation, Hitler believed that it was a central task to fight and annihilate the so-called counter-race, which primarily meant "the Jews". However, in a wider perspective, he was fighting against all "racial competitors." The crucial element of this ideological construct was its dichotomy. Hitler adopted these theories and their categorizations not just in *MK* but as key elements of his political belief system that he propagated constantly until his death.

Finally, what has been the postwar fate of *MK*? There was the attempt to make the book vanish by order no. 4 of the Allied Control Council for Germany from 13 May 1946. According to this decree, the "literature and works of a National Socialist and militaristic nature" should be seized and then destroyed. Only a limited number of copies should be made available in libraries in a controlled manner. This was never realized. Since there had been printed 12,450,000 copies of *MK* in the German language in at least



1,122 editions between 1925 and 1945, it is safe to say that at least several tens of thousands of copies survived the Third Reich. It was forbidden to reprint the text, but *MK* was always available and around. It was easily possible to buy as many copies as one wanted in antiquarian bookshops as long as this was claimed to be for research-or-academic-interest reasons. And there was no difficulty buying a copy of the people's edition of *MK* online from antiquarian booksellers at moderate prices. This changed in 2012 when the discussion about the imminence of an edition at the end of its copyright period gained wider public attention. When the debate intensified most online offers more or less vanished, but the text was still available in the same ways as before, even as a pdf version on the internet.

The only reason no academic critical edition could be issued for decades was copyright. Upon Hitler's death he was considered to be a citizen of Munich, where he had owned a flat and officially lived since the 1920s. As with the rest of Hitler's property, US Occupation Authorities seized the rights of his book that resided with his publisher, *Franz Eher Nachfolger* in Munich. It had been the dominating publishing house of the Third Reich. In 1948, the rights were transferred to the Free State of Bavaria and in 1965 the Bavarian ministry of finance took over responsibility. With reference to the copyright this ministry consistently refused to allow any republication of the text. All arguments by professional historians to permit a critical edition in alignment with other texts published by Hitler were met with rejection. In 1980, Eberhard Jäckel and Axel Kuhn released their edition of Hitler's complete writings for the period from 1905 to 1924.<sup>37</sup> From 1992 to 2003, the Institute for Contemporary History edited twelve volumes comprising Adolf Hitler's speeches, writings, and decrees for the period from 1925 to 1933 (*Reden, Schriften und Anordnungen*).<sup>38</sup> Thus, for many years all relevant texts by Hitler up to 1933, and indeed many texts from subsequent years, were available in scholarly editions. For the period before 1933, just one single notable text remained unedited: *Mein Kampf*. Thus, when the Institute for Contemporary History issued its critical edition of *MK* in

<sup>37</sup>Eberhard Jäckel and Axel Kuhn, eds, *Adolf Hitler. Sämtliche Aufzeichnungen 1905–1924*, Stuttgart: DVA, 1980. In their search for new sources Jäckel and Kuhn selected several texts, which were later identified as forgeries which had been produced by Konrad Kujau, who also invented "Hitler's Diaries." Eberhard Jäckel and Axel Kuhn, "Zu einer Edition von Aufzeichnungen Hitlers," in *VfZ* 29 (1981): 304-5. Eberhard Jäckel, Axel Kuhn, and Eberhard Weiß, "Neue Erkenntnisse zur Fälschung von Hitler-Dokumenten," in *VfZ* 32 (1984): 163-9.

<sup>38</sup>Institut für Zeitgeschichte, ed., *Hitler. Reden, Schriften, Anordnungen Februar 1925 bis Januar 1933. Fünf Bände (in zwölf Teilen), Register, Kartenband, Ergänzungsband "Der Hitler-Prozeß 1924"* (in vier Teilen), Munich: Saur, 1992-2003.

January 2016, this publication was long overdue. This lacuna remains true for Hitler's speeches from 1933 to 1945, which are available only in small selections or in unsatisfactory versions, as in the collection by Max Domarus which is still used widely and uncritically.<sup>39</sup> With a team of colleagues we aim to fill this research gap in the coming years and provide a critical edition of approximately 800 texts including about 300 audio-file editions.<sup>40</sup>

One hundred years after its first publication, *Mein Kampf* is still around. It has always been readily available not only in Germany but all over the world. But the interest in the text has moved. When the copyright ended in 2016, the critical edition prevented uncommented reprints in Germany having a market. The interest to learn about the book's background and historical context has remained high. In today's context and with the passage of time, its contents are hard to comprehend for readers who are far removed from the aftermath of the First World War, the crises of Weimar Germany and the rhetoric of that period. Its mass appeal at the time was linked to its author as a political actor. The book was an icon for Hitler's followers and has remained so for those who pursue racist world views. For rational readers, be it academics or the interested public of an open society in general, it remains a significant source for twentieth-century history, especially in understanding Hitler's and the Nazi movement's violent and destructive mindset.

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<sup>39</sup>Magnus Brechtken and Maximilian Becker, "Die Edition der Reden Adolf Hitlers von 1933 bis 1945. Ein neues Projekt des Instituts für Zeitgeschichte," in *VfZ* 67 (2019): 147-163.

<sup>40</sup>Available at: <https://www.ifz-muenchen.de/forschung/ea/forschung/edition-der-reden-adolf-hitlers-von-1933-bis-1945>, accessed 6 January 2025.