

Hitler And Books

On his time in Vienna, Hitler writes in *Mein Kampf*: ‘I read a lot and I read thoroughly. All the time I had left besides work I spent studying.’¹ As much of what Hitler claimed in *Mein Kampf* has emerged as fabricated or simply untrue, this remark is disregarded by many biographers, or else relegated to the realm of legend; after all, Hitler was more famed for burning books than reading them. The general belief is that Hitler gained his insights primarily from newspapers and magazines. However, eyewitness statements and the results of recent historical research paint a different picture. ‘There is no reason to doubt that when he was young, Hitler devoted himself to serious reading. World literature, non-fiction, the classics of philosophy.’²

Hitler did not just read books – he appears to have been utterly obsessed with them. According to August Kubizek, his roommate in Vienna, reading was a ‘deadly serious business’³ for Hitler. In Kubizek’s words: ‘That’s the way it was with my friend, books, always more books. I can’t imagine Adolf without books. At home he piled up books all around him. He always had to carry around the book he was reading at the time. Even when he wasn’t reading at the moment, it had to be in his presence. When he went out, he always had at least one book under his arm. Sometimes taking books along became a problem. Then he would even refrain from going outside. Books were his everything⁴.’ Kubizek also mentions the huge impression made by the library of the (Jewish) family Jehoda on Hitler. He says that Hitler visited the *Hofbibliothek* (court library) in Vienna so often that he ‘asked him in all seriousness whether he planned to read every book in the library, for which Hitler shouted at me’.⁵

¹ A. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, Munich 1936, p.21

² P. Gassert, D.S. Mattern, *The Hitler Library*, Westport 2001, p.1

³ A. Kubizek, *Hitler mein Jugendfreund*, Wien 1953, p.225

⁴ A. Kubizek, *ibid.*, p.244ff

⁵ A. Kubizek, *ibid.*, p.225

In Munich from 1912 to 1913, Hitler also seems to have read an extraordinary amount. His landlady, Frau Popp, was asked whether Hitler had ever brought women up to his room. She answered that she had never seen Hitler with a woman, though always with books. Her son also confirmed that Hitler continuously borrowed books from libraries. Hitler's roommate in Munich, Rudolf Häusler, complained that Hitler always read until three or four in the morning⁶. According to Kubizek, Hitler mainly studied textbooks and philosophical works. Works of fiction interested him less, although he did read classics such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Goethe's *Faust*, and *William Tell*. Hitler was particularly fond of Karl May's Wild West stories for boys. Albert Speer reports in his memoirs that during the Second World War, Hitler exhorted his generals to read Karl May to improve their weak powers of imagination. Before his execution in Nuremberg, Hans Frank, the General Governor in occupied Poland, recalled that Hitler mentioned having the works of Homer and Arthur Schopenhauer with him during the First World War⁷. Ernst Hanfstengel, a former supporter and eventual opponent of Hitler, had a close relationship with him after the First World War. He states: 'Hitler was neither uneducated nor socially awkward [...] My library came to experience his voracious appetite for books.'⁸ When Thule member Dr Friedrich Krohn allowed Hitler to use his library, Hitler borrowed over 100 books from him between 1919 and 1921.⁹ When Hitler ended up in prison in Landsberg as the result of his attempted coup in 1923, he used the time to read. 'Landsberg,' said Hitler to Hans Frank, 'was my college at the State's expense.' He is purported to have read every book he could lay his hands on there.¹⁰

⁶ B. Hamann, *Hitler's Wien*, Munich 1996, p.567

⁷ H. Frank, *Im Angesicht des Galgens*, Munich 1953, p.46

⁸ E. Hanfstaengl, *Zwischen Weissem und Braunem Haus*, Munich 1970, p.44

⁹ R.G.L. Waite, *Psychopathic God*, New York 1977, p.56

¹⁰ H. Frank, *Im Angesicht des Galgens*, Munich 1953, p.46–47, summarised in: I. Kershaw, *Hitler 1889–1936*, from the English translated by: J.P. Krause and J.W. Rademacher, Stuttgart 1998, p.298

After 1920, Hitler began to compile his own library, which grew rapidly within a few years.¹¹ In his 1925 tax declaration, Hitler claimed to have no property other than a writing desk and two cupboards containing books; in 1930, his spending on books had already reached 1,692 deutschmarks – his largest deduction after expenditures on travel and transport.¹² In October 1934, Hitler took out fire insurance with *Gladbacher Feuerversicherung* for his six-bedroom apartment on Prinzregentenplatz in Munich. In this policy, Hitler estimated the value of his 6,000-tome library at 150,000 deutschmarks.¹³ Christa Schroeder, Hitler's long-time secretary, recalled: 'This passion for reading books and acquiring their wide-ranging contents let him to expand his knowledge in almost all fields of literature and science. I was always amazed with his accuracy when giving a geographical description of an area or talking about art history or even discussing complicated technical subjects.'¹⁴ As Chancellor of the Reich, Hitler not only had a library in Munich, but also another in the Imperial Chancery in Berlin. There, he collected books given to him on special occasions such as Christmas, his birthday and so on, and books he acquired himself. K. W. Krause, Hitler's valet, reported that 'Hitler possessed a library of several thousand volumes [...] He acquired his knowledge from extensive reading [...] If a German book was published, it was presented to [Hitler] by me [the valet]. I had signed a contract with a large bookseller in Berlin to be supplied with every new book immediately [...] Hitler either returned the books presented to him the next morning, or had them incorporated into his library'¹⁵

Hitler owned a third library in the Berghof in Berchtesgaden. Photographs of his office on the Obersalzberg show multiple glazed bookcases.¹⁶ Journalists who visited Hitler in the Berghof also reported seeing walls of books in his private

¹¹ E. Hanfstaengel, op. cit., p.52ff

¹² O.J. Hale, 'Adolf Hitler Taxpayer', in: *The American Historical Review* 60 (1955) S. 830–842

¹³ T.W. Ryback, *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 2003

¹⁴ C. Schroeder, *Er war mein Chef*, Munich 1985, p.75

¹⁵ K.W. Krause, *Zehn Jahre Kammerdiener bei Hitler*, Hamburg 1950, p.48ff

¹⁶ See photograph in F. Schaffing, E. Baumann, 'Hitler Hoffman', *Der Obersalzberg*, Munich 1985, p.105

chambers, though the number of books in the Berghof could not have exceeded a few hundred. That was not how it had been intended, however. Hitler's plans for the extension of the Berghof included a library of gigantic proportions, incorporating shelves for 61,000 volumes.¹⁷

Most of Hitler's books were looted during the last days of the war. The last 3,000 volumes were seized by the US Army after the war, and many of these also went missing. In January 1952, around 1,200 of the remaining copies were deposited at the Library of Congress in Washington. Another eighty books from Hitler's private library are part of the 'Rare Book Collection' in the John Hay Library at Brown University on Rhode Island, many of which carry the *Führer's* bookplate: an eagle, a swastika, and oak branches between the words '*Ex Libris*' and 'Adolf Hitler'.¹⁸

¹⁷ Bavarian Capital Archive Munich, Charts and Maps, Obersalzberg, Haus Wachenfeld, 5456

¹⁸ P. Gassert, D.S. Mattern, op. cit., p.1ff