

INTRODUCTION

Why is yet another book about Hitler necessary? Has not Hitler, the Third Reich, and National Socialism already been sufficiently mapped and described so that another book about these historical phenomena cannot but be superfluous? Judging by the constant stream of new books on the topic every year, the obvious answer is “no.” There does not seem to be a limit for the number of books that can be produced and consumed. The market appears to be insatiable. Granted, not every book written has been either necessary, or helpful when it comes to increasing our understanding of this part of our common history. Nonetheless, there may be a more interesting question to be answered here, namely: Are there aspects of this topic that have not yet been given quite the attention in the literature that they deserve? The answer to this question is an equally obvious “yes.” There are many issues and aspects of National Socialism that are in need of further research. Among them is the topic of this book: Hitler’s and National Socialism’s relationship to the central figure of Christianity – Jesus Christ.¹ Hitler’s relationship to Christianity has been hotly debated.

¹ Recently, the French historian Johann Chapoutot has touched on this theme, but his book is more about the Nazi cultural revolution in general. The focus is not on Hitler’s ideology but rather on the ideas on which National Socialism was built as they were espoused by other ideologues, lawyers, and politicians; see Chapoutot, Johann, *La révolution culturelle nazie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017), pp. 135–177. The book only contains a few references to Hitler’s writings and speeches.

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It has been claimed that he resented Christianity in all its forms, although much of that scholarship is built on poor sources and reasoning.

In his book *Humanity*, Jonathan Glover quotes Hitler talking about what he thought about Christianity:

I shall never come personally to terms with the Christian lie. . . . Our epoch will certainly see the end of the disease of Christianity. It will last another hundred years, two hundred years perhaps. My regret will have been that I couldn't, like whoever the prophet was, behold the promised land from afar.²

This is an oft-quoted passage from the famous source *Hitler's Table Talk*.³ It certainly seems to confirm that Hitler was a staunch non-believer and completely anti-Christian. There is only one problem with it: it is based on a forgery. The English text was translated not from the German original (despite historian H. R. Trevor-Roper's claim to the contrary), which is problematic from a source-critical perspective, but from a French version of that text produced by the Swiss Nazi sympathizer (and owner of one of the German source texts) François Genoud and published a year prior to *Hitler's Table Talk* in 1952.⁴ Genoud not only rewrote the German original text, but he also inserted completely new phrases into it. I reviewed the unreliability of the “table talk” texts in great detail in my book *Hitler Redux*.⁵

² Glover, Jonathan, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), p. 355.

³ Hitler, A., *Hitler's Table Talk: His Private Conversations 1941–1944. With an introductory essay on the mind of Adolf Hitler by H. R. Trevor-Roper* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1953), p. 343.

⁴ Genoud, François, *Libres propos sur la Guerre et la Paix: Recueillis sur l'ordre de Martin Bormann. Préface de Robert d'Harcourt de l'Académie française. Version française de François Genoud*, Vol. I (Paris: Flammarion, 1952), p. 332.

⁵ Nilsson, Mikael, *Hitler Redux: The Incredible History of Hitler's So-Called Table Talks* (London: Routledge, 2021); for a dissection of this part, see pp. 2–4. This fact has not stopped David Redles from citing the table talks in a recent publication. Redles refers to my research and acknowledges the problematic nature of these sources but thinks I go “too far in largely dismissing them as a legitimate source.” He cites the corrupted English edition and says he has “consulted both German editions to verify the English translations,” but this does nothing at all to offset the real problem with these sources, which is that the German texts cannot be trusted to provide an accurate record either. Redles then makes an obviously

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To discover Hitler's true attitudes toward Jesus and to really understand what he himself understood true Christianity to be, historians must move beyond this and other similarly unreliable and questionable sources. Instead, we need to delve into the core beliefs of National Socialism. In this book, I do this by examining the foundational texts of National Socialism, as well as the more reliable sources for Hitler's personal beliefs. In the process, I show that the character of Jesus, the central figure in Christianity, also held a central place within Hitler's ideology. This suggests that Hitler and the other National Socialists understood true Christianity to be something entirely different than what we are used to imagining. Instead of rejecting Christianity as a whole, it turns out that Hitler and his followers were seeking to reestablish the original teachings of Jesus, which they thought had been lost over the centuries due to the manipulations of the apostle Paul and then the Catholic Church.

This book thus argues that Hitler's religious beliefs were of central importance for how National Socialism as an ideology developed from 1920 onwards, for how the Third Reich was organized, and for why Hitler and his henchmen developed policies designed to inflict so much suffering and death. There can be doubt that this is an argument that has thus far not taken center stage when historians have studied Hitler's Germany. Of course, one may argue that it was only *the way Hitler used religious beliefs* that was important and that he therefore did not really believe what he said. But by studying the ideological history of National Socialism and its foundational texts, even those written before Hitler became a National Socialist, we can trace the roots of the central position held by Jesus within National Socialism. A careful reading of the primary sources shows without a doubt that religious faith and deeply held convictions regarding what plan God had

false claim, namely, that the table talks never were considered verbatim sources (Redles, David, "The Apocalypse of Adolf Hitler: *Mein Kampf* and the Eschatological Origins of the Holocaust," in John J. Michalczyk, Michael S. Bryant, and Susan A. Michalczyk (eds.), *Hitler's Mein Kampf and the Holocaust: A Prelude to Genocide* [London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022], p. 318, n60). But the table talk notes were indeed considered verbatim records because they were for a very long time claimed to be, and accepted as, the work of a stenographer. I prove and debunk this very notion in my book *Hitler Redux*, which Redles refers to in his text.

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for humankind and the universe were at the very core of National Socialism, its racism, the Second World War, and – not least – the Holocaust. This may at first appear to be a controversial statement. It is my conviction, however, that when the reader finishes this book, this opinion will no longer be present – instead, it will be obvious to the reader that my argument is worth taking very seriously.

It is important to understand that National Socialism was not an invention of Hitler and the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP). Its history began many decades before 1919/20. For example, the Czech National Socialist Party was founded already in 1898, and in 1903 the German Workers' Party (DAP) [*not* the one that Hitler would join in 1919] in Bohemia saw the light of day. The latter renamed itself the “German National Socialist Workers' Party” (DNSAP) in 1918 and then split into one Austrian and one German branch. National Socialism was therefore not at all born out of the chaos of the First World War, writes Thomas Weber. Even the Zionists had their own dream of a National Socialist homeland, he notes. Furthermore, the first country to have a National Socialist elected to parliament was neither Germany nor Austria, but Great Britain. This happened when John Joseph “Jack” Jones of the British National Socialist Party got elected to the House of Commons on December 14, 1918. In Germany, however, the roots went even further back. National Socialism developed on the political right shortly after the German unification in 1871 as a reaction against Marxism and Social Democracy, as Asaf Kedar shows. There were various forms already from the beginning – a liberal-Christian bourgeois strain (represented by Friedrich Naumann), a moderate conservative-Christian lineage (represented by Adolf Stoecker), and a more radical extreme-right (mostly) Christian strain (represented by the ideologue and NSDAP member Theodor Fritsch).⁶

This means that the argument put forth in this book should not necessarily be interpreted as one aligning with the German *Sonderweg*

⁶ Kedar, Asaf, “National Socialism before Nazism: Friedrich Naumann and Theodor Fritsch, 1890–1914,” PhD diss. (University of California, Berkeley, 2010); Weber, Thomas, *Becoming Hitler: The Making of a Nazi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. xiii–xiv.

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(special path) hypothesis. Although Hitler and the NSDAP naturally emerged out of a specifically German historical context and their ideologies can be traced back to the National Socialist discourses that immediately preceded them in the German-speaking world, similar ideas were afloat also in other parts of Europe at the same time. Fascism, then, was not a German *Sonderweg* but instead a part of a general ideological trend in Europe and elsewhere in the world. Yet, the form that National Socialism took in Germany was not mirrored in other countries. In this sense, every country had its own *Sonderweg* due to the unique circumstances they each found themselves in.

While a lot has been written about National Socialism's connection to, and Hitler's view of, religion in general and Christianity in particular, no study has yet investigated the role of Jesus in National Socialist ideology. This book therefore plugs a significant hole in the literature in the field. It argues that Hitler was an honest admirer of Jesus – or rather, the Nazi interpretation of Jesus, who should not be confused with the Jesus of orthodox Christianity – and that he viewed him as an inspiration both for a National Socialist's moral and ethical development as well as for the political struggle against the Jews.

Chapter 1 shows that the ideological roots of National Socialism's connection to Jesus go back much further than 1919. National Socialism arose from a conservative religious milieu in Germany already in the 1870s–1890s. Because of the racial antisemitism⁷ that grew stronger and stronger from the mid-1800s onwards, more and more Christian theologians started to question the racial status of the central figure in their faith – Jesus – turning him into an Aryan. In Nazi Germany, this development would culminate in the theology of the Protestant church movement *Deutsche Christen*. Hitler tapped into, and drew from, this tradition, and it became the foundation for his understanding of Jesus.

Chapter 2 deals with Dietrich Eckart and Houston Stewart Chamberlain, the two most central figures in Hitler's religious and ideological development in the early 1920s. Eckart appears to have been the most important for Hitler's political schooling. Eckart's book

⁷ I follow the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) recommendation for the spelling, which is "antisemitism" instead of "anti-Semitism" because of the antisemitic roots of the derived construct "Semite."

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Der Bolschewismus von Moses bis Lenin,⁸ which contained a fictional conversation between himself and Hitler on religious and political topics, offers us a view into the religious universe that Eckart and Hitler coinhabited. The book is also a clear testament to the fact that religious beliefs had a central place within National Socialism. Chamberlain's views of Jesus as an Aryan warrior became a vital part of Hitler's theology. Still, Hitler did not simply copy Eckart's or Chamberlain's ideas. A good example of this is that Hitler rejected the apostle Paul while Chamberlain accepted him. The early 1920s were indeed formative years for Hitler's political ideology and understanding of himself and his place in the world, and it was at this time that Eckart convinced him that he was the one that was destined to bring salvation to Germany.

In Chapter 3, I deal with the issue of whether Hitler considered Jesus to have been divine. This is certainly not a trivial issue. It is pertinent to the question of whether Hitler considered his mission to be from God and thereby have divine sanction. The explicit references to Jesus are not very frequent, and most of them appear during the 1920s and, to a lesser extent, in the early 1930s. Yet Hitler made these statements both in public and in private. Therefore, I maintain that the claim that his comments about Jesus and Christianity were just intended for public consumption and propaganda purposes cannot be sustained. Granted that the evidence is a bit ambiguous, and at times even contradictory, we nonetheless have several examples of Hitler clearly referring to Jesus as divine. This has not been noticed by historians before and should be considered very significant.

Chapter 4 argues that Hitler modeled his own political conversion story as presented in *Mein Kampf* on the narrative about the apostle Paul's conversion in Acts 9. We find too many parallels between this story and the one that Hitler offered in *Mein Kampf* for the connection to be purely accidental. Hitler includes a period of temporary blindness, a conversation with the divine, and an awakening experience that gave him his sight back, and he portrays himself as the founder of a great and revolutionizing movement. Just like Paul, Hitler

⁸ Eckart, Dietrich, *Der Bolschewismus von Moses bis Lenin: Zweigespräch zwischen Adolf Hitler und mir* (Munich: Franz Eher Verlag, 1924).

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emphasizes that he went from being completely unknown to someone who was recognized all over, and he also claims to have received a mission from God. It was also a convenient narrative device that Hitler could be certain would be familiar to his readers.

In Chapter 5, finally, I show how Hitler's admiration – and National Socialism's more generally – for Jesus inspired the politics of Nazi Germany up until the very end in the bunker in Berlin in April 1945. In the example of Jesus, Hitler found the inspiration for fighting the Jews, and it was in the former's footsteps that he felt he and his party were following. He considered himself chosen by God to fulfill the mission that Jesus had not been able to complete: the eradication of the Jewish people from the face of the earth. In the Conclusion, I then summarize my findings and end with suggestions and recommendations for future research.

Sources and Source Criticism

The last twenty years have seen a steady stream of books in both English and German (as well as many other languages of course) about Hitler's religiosity. It is therefore not possible to argue that this is a theme that has not received any attention by historians. Nonetheless, this aspect of Hitler's personality remains one of the least known to the public. One major reason for this omission is that the biographies of Hitler refer to this topic only in passing (if that) and that his religious faith is not given any weight at all in that literature. But there is also a clear flaw in the literature that does deal with Hitler's religiosity, namely, that proper source criticism is often lacking. These works tend to cite every available source without exception and without using any apparent historical epistemological principles according to which the unreliable information can be separated from the reliable. This is the case not least regarding what is perhaps the most famous source for Hitler's anti-Christian statements: the so-called table talks.⁹ But Hitler's

⁹ I have investigated the history of the table talks in detail in Nilsson, M., *Hitler Redux* ... See also Nilsson, Mikael, "Hitler Redivivus: Hitlers 'Tischgespräche' und 'Monologe im Führerhauptquartier': eine kritische Untersuchung," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (2019), pp. 105–146; Nilsson, Mikael, "Constructing a Pseudo-Hitler? The Question of the Authenticity of *Hitlers politisches Testament*," *European Review of*

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table talks are far from the only source that is cited uncritically by historians; the same goes for the memoirs of former Nazis.

This book started as a summary of the state of research on the topic of Hitler's religious beliefs, but soon I realized that I would have to go through the primary sources anew and not only (perhaps) reinterpret what other historians had already done, but also weed out the sources and literature that are not trustworthy. Therefore, the writing turned into a multiyear research project conducted on evenings and weekends. One of the most central problems with large parts of the previous literature is the reliance on "contemporary eyewitnesses," that is, Nazis that had spent a longer or shorter period of time in Hitler's entourage and who, often many years or even several decades after the war, decided to tell "their story," often to journalists. These eyewitnesses, of whom the most (in)famous must no doubt be Albert Speer, have subsequently been able to spread their version of reality virtually unopposed to historians and journalists who have relied on their "memories" when writing about Hitler and the Third Reich. These memories are always affected by these Nazis' wish to clear their own names – or whatever other agenda they may have had – and to more often than not blame everything that happened in Nazi Germany on Hitler's almost magical powers of persuasion.

Instead of assuming that these witnesses are telling the truth, the opposite approach should be taken, that is, what they say should always be considered suspect until proven otherwise. Speer's lies were introduced almost at the very beginning through the British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper and his book *The Last Days of Hitler* from 1947 (which built on interviews with Speer) and his countryman Alan Bullock's *Hitler: A Study of Tyranny* from 1952.¹⁰ German historians were not much better. The first thorough German Hitler biography, written by the journalist Joachim Fest and published in 1973,¹¹ was to a significant

History–Revue Européenne d'histoire, Vol. 26, No. 5 (2018), pp. 871–891; Nilsson, Mikael, "Hugh Trevor-Roper and the English Editions of Hitler's Table Talk and Testament," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (2015), pp. 788–812; Carrier, Richard, "Hitler's Table Talk: Troubling Finds," *German Studies Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (2003), pp. 561–576.

¹⁰ Trevor-Roper, Hugh, *The Last Days of Hitler* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1947); Bullock, Alan, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (London: Odhams Press, 1952).

¹¹ Fest, Joachim, *Hitler: Eine Biographie* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1973).

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degree based on his many conversations with Speer since they had first met in August 1967. Fest had then been given the task by the publisher Wolf Jobst Siedler to edit and rewrite (effectively ghostwrite) Speer's manuscript for his *Erinnerungen* (Memoirs – later published in English as *Inside the Third Reich*).¹² After the publication of his Hitler biography, Fest came to take on a similar role during the publication of Speer's *Spandauer Tagebücher* (Diaries from Spandau) in 1975.¹³ During this work, Fest made Speer write down Hitler quotations for him, which Speer dutifully did. In this way, “genuine” Hitler quotes were created no less than twenty-two years after the end of the war, which have subsequently found their way into basically all history books about the Third Reich.¹⁴ Nonetheless, Speer's two books received glowing reviews both in Germany and elsewhere. For example, the historian Klaus Hildebrand declared that Speer's diaries were a very important *contemporary* source out of which direct citations of Hitler could be mined.¹⁵ Not even after Speer was exposed as a relentless liar did historians seem to change their mind about him. Therefore, Speer cannot be used to corroborate anything except how he wished to portray himself and the events and people he spoke about. As a source for knowledge about the realities of Hitler and the Third Reich, Speer's books are worthless. The main takeaway from all of this is that a lot in the previous literature has in fact been shown to be incorrect, or at least in need of serious nuancing, by newer research. But far from all prior scholarship has been vetted in this way to see how much flawed or incorrect information from these eyewitnesses it contains.

For this reason, I have as far as possible refrained from referring to, and from supporting my argumentation with, such eyewitness

¹² Speer, Albert, *Erinnerungen* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1969).

¹³ Speer, Albert, *Spandauer Tagebücher* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1975).

¹⁴ For more on Fest's and Siedler's role in the publication of Speer's books, as well as a review of the state of research on the topic, see Brechtken, Magnus, *Albert Speer: Eine deutsche Karriere* (Munich: Siedler, 2017), passim, but especially pp. 9–15, 365–576. Fest also received part of the revenues from the sales of Speer's books, which already in the case of *Erinnerungen* had made him a wealthy man.

¹⁵ Brechtken, M., *Albert Speer* . . . , pp. 407–410, 485–491. Certain criticism did occur, but this never managed to drown out the celebratory reviews or Speer's defenders. For a detailed review of the reception of Speer's books, see Trommer, Isabell, *Rechtfertigung und Entlassung: Albert Speer in der Bundesrepublik* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2016).

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accounts (both directly and indirectly via other literature) if I have been unable to corroborate the information with independent, reliable sources. An obvious exception to this rule is where I have wished to show how these eyewitnesses wanted to portray their own role post facto. Instead, I have based my analysis on the available primary contemporary source material in addition to the existing scholarship. This does not mean that these primary sources are unproblematic. The editions of Hitler's speeches and writings present the historian with several delicate problems. We can, for example, never be certain that Hitler formulated his words in exactly the way that the transcripts show (except in the cases where we have audio recordings that can be compared to the text). Hitler did not read a completed manuscript when he spoke; rather, he improvised from a set of supporting notes and a core of established themes that he returned to repeatedly. In many cases, the speeches were taken down by the NSDAP stenographer and then transcribed and published in the *Völkischer Beobachter*. These notes then follow Hitler's actual words very well, but they still do contain occasional corrections made afterwards, as well as a few transcription mistakes. Moreover, we far from always have access to full verbatim transcripts. Often what we have are summaries made by police observers or journalists, for example, who then published their notes in the newspapers. Sometimes, however, we have dictations by Hitler made for speeches that were to be read by someone else, for instance by Goebbels. This happened on several occasions, especially toward the end of the war as Hitler's public appearances became few and far between. Even though we can then be rather sure that the wording is correct, there are examples where the speech was shortened by Goebbels due to time constraints.

The period 1905–24 is covered by the source volume *Hitler: Sämtliche Aufzeichnungen* (Hitler's Collected Notes) published in 1980. It contains not only transcribed speeches, but also speech notes, summaries in the form of police reports and newspaper articles, interviews, and letters.¹⁶ However, this volume contains no less than seventy-five forgeries made by the con artist Konrad Kujau, who also forged the

¹⁶ Jäckel, Eberhard (ed.), *Hitler: Sämtliche Aufzeichnungen 1905–1924* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1980). Henceforth: SA.