

**REINTERPRETING THE HITLER PHENOMENON:
A REVIEW OF RUSSELL H.S. STOLFI'S HITLER:
BEYOND EVIL AND TYRANNY**

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Historical greatness is amoral. A giant in the pages of history need not to be a paragon of virtue nor must he possess saintly qualities. The sheer impact of his stamp on the course of events alone determines his place in the historical pantheon. He brands the preceding and succeeding eras by his name. For instance, not every Persian ruler dominates the historical narrative as Cyrus the Great. Likewise, if not for the energy of Genghis Khan, Mongols might have been a footnote in history. What would have been the chain of events had Napoleon not embarked on his continental campaigns? These were all cataclysmic moments. The historical 'order' altered permanently after each of the stated episodes.

For the past 100 years, it can be asserted confidently that the history of the world let alone Europe would have been radically different had a certain dispatch courier on the German front during the Great War killed by an enemy artillery shell. When Adolf Hitler ended his life in April 1945, the continent had entered a new era. For the first time in almost three thousand years there was no European power capable enough to dominate the continental affairs. The 'victors' like France and Great Britain who were energised Imperialist powers just a generation ago lost the will to hold on to their foreign conquests. Gradually, they retreated from the world. Two outside powers, the United States and Soviet Russia, held the fate of Europe in their hands. A new order came into being. Western Europe went under the security umbrella of the United States while the eastern half fell to the Soviets.

Why must Hitler occupy such a place in history and not Stalin, Churchill or Roosevelt? It could be answered that the former acted whereas the latter figures reacted. Hitler concluded that the post Versailles state of affairs would have to be smashed. He saw himself as the deliverer who would redeem Teutonic honour lost in the deliberations at Versailles. And, therefore, he not only pilloried the consensus but undertook actions that

severely undermined it. In the end, he did not succeed but for six long years the world held its breath. Naturally, biographical work on Adolf Hitler should appreciate the gravity of this development. However, the meta-narrative of the major biographies defines the man as unadulterated evil singularly focused on consolidating a bloodthirsty tyranny.

Prof Russell H.S. Stolfi challenges this narrative in his *Hitler: Beyond Evil and Tyranny*. He puts Hitler in the league of Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great for his historical impact. He maintains that Hitler was a Hegelian world historical personality who should be studied not only against his contemporary context but also as a providentially inspired figure fanatically committed to bring salvation to his people. According to the author, he was a Messiah with neatly delineated aims. The professor laments that the great biographers seem to prosecute the man instead of historicising him. It is assumed that even an adolescent, idealistic Hitler wandering in his hometown was somehow evil incarnate. Why should a Hitler of 1908 be personified as the Hitler who took his life on 30 April 1945? Why do the biographers assume that a young, artistically sensitive Hitler wanted to shun his mediocrity by pursuing politics? Why in case of Hitler the historians suddenly become skeptic and indulge in sarcasm when they encounter something contrary to the popular narrative? These are some of the questions that the professor put forward in his treatise. The book does not follow a strict chronological order. It is a kind of 'meta-biography'¹ that seeks to renew the parameters of historiography around Hitler.

Russell H.S. Stolfi (1932-2012) was professor emeritus at the US Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. He retired as a colonel from US Marine Corps Reserve. Besides this publication, he also authored *German Panzers on the Offensive: Russian Front, North Africa 1941-42*; *Hitler's Panzers East: World War II Reinterpreted*; and *NATO under Attack: Why the Western Alliance Can Fight Outnumbered and Win in Central Europe without Nuclear Weapons* (with Friedrich Wilhelm von Mellenthin and E. Sobik).

He critiques Alan Bullock's *Adolf Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, Werner Maser's *Hitler: Legend, Myth and Reality*, Joachim Fest's *Hitler*, John Toland's *Adolf*

¹ "R. H. S. Stolfi's *Hitler: Beyond Evil & Tyranny*", accessed May 6, 2019, <https://www.counter-currents.com/2013/05/r-h-s-stolfis-hitler-beyond-evil-and-tyranny-part-1/>.

Hitler, and the Ian Kershaw's Hitler, 1889-1936: Hubris, and Hitler, 1936-1945: Nemesis.

The following space reviews the fundamental themes of the book, which are as follows:

- A Germanic Messiah
- A Cultured Thug
- A Hegelian World Historical Personality

A Germanic Messiah

When Hitler opened his eyes, the European continent stood at the pinnacle of its power. Approximately four-fifths of the globe was under European Imperial control. The Bismarckian Second Reich was the strongest power on the continent, a worthy successor to Charlemagne's Holy Roman Empire. The Prussian led German unification had reordered the geostrategic grid of Central Europe. France had lost its pre-eminence, which had brought Tsarist Russia into the picture to counterbalance the combine Austro-Hungarian and Germanic strength. This brinkmanship reached its climax when a Serb terrorist killed the heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian crown. Vienna mobilized against Serbia which prompted the Tsar to come to the aid of its Slavic brethren. In turn Austria called its northern Germanic brethren, and Europe stood at the brink of another savage conflict.

When the hostilities ceased four years later, four royal houses (Austrian, Prussian, Russian, Ottoman) had vanished. The victors singled out the Second Reich as the prime villain, and handed a devastating 'peace' to a battered generation.

People like Hitler who experienced the brutality first hand (reference from the book) came back incensed at the authorities who signed on behalf of the German nation. To add insult to injury, the socio-political fabric was being trampled upon. The folk were being divided on the basis of 'class'. Foreign and domestic capitulations set the stage for a redeemer, who would revitalise the dejected folk. Certainly, there were many like Hitler in Weimar Republic who must have tackled this issue in their heads. However, few were there who could have matched the absolute determination of this Lance corporal. He had returned militarily decorated with battle scars. Hence in nationalist circles his credentials were impeccable.

Prof Stolfi takes the great biographers to task for denigrating Hitler's military honours.² This urge to belittle stems from the fallacy of analysing the soldier Hitler with an already hypothesised Fuhrer Hitler.

The author makes an interesting psychological insight regarding Hitler. On more than one occasion during the War Hitler narrowly escaped an enemy artillery shell, which blew several of his colleagues into smithereens. The experience must have taught him that Providence had saved him for something grand. His Messianic characterisation of himself must have received a final confirmation.³

Now, Messiahs and Prophets do not consider half measures. They have absolute, uncompromising solutions. According to the author, their doctrinal commitment does not yield to political compulsions. Their singularity of purpose keeps them one level above run-of-the-mill dictators. A Prophetic Hitler set the reclamation of German honour as his mission, and he declared Marxism/Communism and Jews as the elements that would need to be separated from the German social fabric. Moreover, he was prepared to take barbaric action to liquidate this impediment just as Julius Caesar was resolved to exterminate or subdue the Gallic and Germanic tribes to advance the cause of Rome.⁴

Interestingly, Hitler did not tolerate dissent emanating from the Right. He personally broke up a meeting organised by *Bayernbund* (Bavarian League). Nazi street infantry manhandled its leader Otto Ballerstedt, and successfully prevented him from speaking. Any division of the German people either from the Left or Right would, in Hitlerian scheme of things, be crushed with equal rigour. Another aspect that the author considers peculiar to Hitler was his emphasis on the spoken word. His declamations were in the mould of revelations a prophet relays from Providence to his people which afterwards takes precedence over conventional laws and customs. His word becomes the law.⁵

² Russell H.S. Stolfi, *Hitler: Beyond Evil and Tyranny*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 2011), 87.

³ Ibid, 95.

⁴ Ibid, 18.

⁵ Ibid, 190.

A Cultured Thug

This book devotes significant space to Hitler's artistic inclinations. The great biographies trivialise the Artist Hitler. However, Prof Stolfi holds that the man was a combination of naked force and sophisticated intellect. In Hitler's own words, 'force must have ideas to support it'.⁶ On the one hand we come across a fervent devotee of Wagnerian operas coupled with an intellectual depth necessary to grasp artistic manifestations like architecture, whereas, on the other hand, we witness a tough street fighter who cut his martial teeth amidst the gory trench warfare. An idealist who always kept a loaded sidearm.⁷

Political activity in Weimar Republic was fraught with danger. Communist street fighters were a force to be reckoned with, and Hitler as German Messiah took them head on. He advanced his National Socialist Workers Party into this volatile arena with the toughs of 'Stormtroopers'. One episode particularly highlighted by the author was when Hitler made a daring entry into a Marxist stronghold of Coburg.⁸

Thus, we obtain an image of Hitler who could lecture on the importance of aesthetics and art, and, at the same time, command his brown shirts against the Marxist enemy on the streets.

A Hegelian World Historical Personality

Hegel would conceptualize in his lectures at the University of Berlin, where he occupied a professorial chair from 1818 through 1831, the phenomenon of the world-historical man and a theory of the unfolding of history in terms of his passion and will. Such men "are great men, because they willed and accomplished something great; not a mere fancy, a mere intention, but that which met the case and fell in with the needs of an age." ...For Hegel, the morality associated with individuals and the laws associated with societies were irrelevant for purposes of criticizing the actions of the world-historical individual.⁹

⁶ Ibid, 189.

⁷ Ibid, 181.

⁸ Ibid, 254-59.

⁹ Ibid, 219.

Perhaps, it is the most controversial pillar of this publication. He departs massively from conventional historians by placing Adolf Hitler in the league of Alexander, Julius Caesar, Napoleon and their likes. He declares that what Hitler achieved in the period (1919-1941) has been enough to categorise him as a world historical personality. His impact has been such that after more than 75 years we are still living in a post-Hitler era. The sheer finality of his mission radically altered the pre-Hitler consensus. What brings Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin, Clemenceau, Daladier, Chamberlain, De Gaulle etc. in one galaxy is the gravitational field generated by the exploits of Adolf Hitler. Paradoxically, these historical luminaries owe their statures of whatever size to the exploits of one man.

Hitler's historical stature lies significantly in his putting Germany in position in August [1941] to win World War II. Hitler's interpretation as world-historical personality lies in his decision to lose World War II. The decision was single, lonely, and influenced by no other man. The Allies did not win the war; Hitler lost it.¹⁰

Conclusion

Nowhere in the text does this book try to justify or rehabilitate the figure of Adolf Hitler. The endeavour has simply been a detailed analytical criticism of the orthodoxy that more or less reflects in every major biographical work on Hitler. It is always a risky enterprise to 'revise' this narrative. There are historians who have been ostracized for questioning the mainstream version of history. However, the author steers clear of potential minefields.

The book opens new portals and takes the reader to new interpretive dimensions regarding the life of Adolf Hitler, who, arguably, remains the dark force that defines the twentieth century.

¹⁰ Ibid, 455.