

David W Fletcher, Fall 2002

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EBERHARD JAECKEL'S *HITLER'S WORLD VIEW*

Eberhard Jaeckel's *Hitler's World View* (1972, Middletown, CT; 1981, Cambridge, MA), a lean but meaty translation by Herbert Arnold of the original *Hitler Weltanschauung* (1969; Tuebingen, Germany), advocates creativity and intentionality on the part of Adolf Hitler, fuhrer of Germany's Third Reich. Jaeckel counters the prevailing notion of the time that the Nazi's chief architect functioned primarily as a strict opportunist; hence, the book is subtitled *A Blueprint for Power (Entwurf einer Herrschaft)*. Jaeckel takes seriously the ideas and philosophy of Hitler that largely had been dismissed by historical scholarship as little more than political opportunism, but he does so circumspectly with careful analysis of the primary evidence. This process leads Jaeckel to conclude that Hitler did develop his own unique *Weltanschauung*, although both primitive and brutal, but nonetheless "a self-consistent synthesis" (107).

A cursory reading of *Hitler's World View* might lead one to believe that Jaeckel takes Hitler's own autobiographical testimony at face value. He does quote heavily from the two volumes of *Mein Kampf* and from the enigmatic work ascribed to Hitler, *Hitler Zweites Buch* (translated *Hitler's Secret Book*). Jaeckel also makes use of interviews, newspaper articles, official papers, party records, speeches, and interpretive sources, i.e., Alan Bullock, Axel Kuhn, Ernst Nolte, Hermann Rauschning, Eva G. Reichmann, and H. R. Trevor-Roper. But in his characterization of Hitler's *Weltanschauung*, Jaeckel rigorously adheres to a procedure that is

skeptical of Hitler's autobiographical rambling and self-congratulatory synthesis. In the last chapter of his book, Jaeckel asserts:

Mein Kampf does, however, reflect the development of Hitler's *Weltanschauung* only in stylized form and hence, to a large extent, as deliberate falsification. It was neither derived by deduction from previously discovered general principles, nor did it follow the kind of inductive method the autobiography is trying to suggest. The present inquiry proceeded, therefore, from the premise that all sources were to be accepted as having information value only for the period during which they originated, and that Hitler's autobiographical remarks were not to be accepted as true unless proven to be correct (116).

Using this methodology, Jaeckel shows that Hitler did portray his own intellectual development, especially about the twin dangers of Marxism and Judaism, as complete, doctrinaire, and rigid since his early days in Vienna (ca. 1908 to 1912). Hitler writes, "I have had to add but little to that which I learned then and I have had to change nothing" (109). But, according to Jaeckel, this stylized version simply masked Hitler's "almost panic fear of changing one's mind" whereby he might discredit himself (see 113). Accordingly, by age thirty, Hitler's "programmatic thinker" could assume the role of "politician" only if he could exercise consistency of action commensurate with and corresponding to logical, mature, and systematic thought. Thus, for Hitler, it became of critical importance to establish the *raison d'être* of his *Weltanschauung* in *Mein Kampf*: "Every power which does not grow out of a firm intellectual base will remain wavering and insecure. It lacks the stability which can only rest on a fanatical *Weltanschauung*. . . . During that time [in Vienna] . . . a *Weltanschauung* grew within me which became the granite foundation of my present actions" (13).

Further, Jaeckel advocates the validity and, in fact, the necessity of *a priori* or deductive over *a posteriori* or inductive reasoning when addressing epistemological concerns, especially any synthesis of a broad world view. He confesses that “it is highly improbable that any world view was ever derived from previously discovered general principles; Hitler’s certainly was not” (108). From this premise, he defines his use of the term “synthesis” in Hitler’s case as meaning “an *ex post facto* systematization, which did not bring anything new in its details but simply pulled together into an ordered coherence all the notions which already existed previously” (ibid.). No doubt, this epistemological stance should invite some measure of formal criticism. Yet, on the basis of such a methodological understanding, Jaeckel remarkably demonstrates how Hitler took ordinary, but perhaps radical ideas that racial theorists recognized and espoused, and wove them together into an extraordinary and personal (i.e., self-realized) *Weltanschauung* that became quite extreme and violent in its attempted realization (chapter VI).

Jaeckel identifies two key elements of Hitler’s *Weltanschauung*: (1) his idea of *Lebensraum* or the conquest of living space for the German race, and (2) his antisemitism or the “elimination” of the Jewish race. [Concerning this latter phrase, a euphemism with various nuances of meaning, Jaeckel rightly and fondly reminds the reader of Hitler’s imprecise use of terminology!] Jaeckel acknowledges the fact that Hitler’s contemporaries, the subsequent generation, and then historical scholarship (i.e., through the 1960s) unanimously judged the Nazi leader as incapable of either creativity or consistency. But he decries the reality that Hitler’s

“great theoretical work” (his *Mein Kampf*) had become “the least read best-seller in world literature” (15).

With his observant reading of Hitler’s own self-determined program of destruction, Jaeckel argues against Rauschning’s “thesis of nihilistic opportunism” and Bullock’s view of Hitler as “an opportunist without principle” (16-17). He also differs with less than adequate treatments of Hitler’s *Weltanschauung* by E. Eucken-Erdsiek (1960), F. Glum (1962), and M. Broszat (1960), who at least entertained the possibility that Hitler’s “consistently pursued territorial policies in the East” failed to fit any theory of “opportunism manipulation” (18). Indeed, through the decade of the 1950s and into the 1960s, as more and more evidence authenticated Hitler as the “dominant, decisive, even ultimately determinant figure of National Socialism,” Jaeckel notes that “the main dilemma confronting historical scholarship became the astonishing and increasing emphasis on Hitler’s political and historical significance in the face of his supposed insignificance in matters concerning *Weltanschauung*” (19). As a plausible solution to this conundrum, Jaeckel accepts Hitler’s actions as consistent with his ideology, programmatic rather than haphazard, and purposeful toward decided goals (likewise H. Heiber, H. B. Gisevius, A. Bullock, and E. Nolte). But in both his virulent hatred of the Jews and his vision of *Lebensraum*, Hitler’s actions followed directions that were bellicose, destructive, and violent.

True, for Jaeckel, minor discrepancies in Hitler’s thinking (and likewise his actions) remain unimportant (40-43). Nor is the distinction between the fuhrer’s *Weltanschauung* as a *means of* rather than a *basis for* political action all that relevant (16). What stands out as

pertinent, however, is Hitler's "absolutely clear and consistent" foreign policy, which he based on "a repulsive but . . . grandiose vision of world history, of the rise and fall of empires" (so Trevor-Roper, 28). On this basis, Hitler "decided to erect once again a great German empire by conquering the East. That had been the vision of his life" (ibid.). Hitler became a "revisionist," albeit one who favored violent means of achieving nationalistic aims, i.e., the punishment of the French and the subjugation of the Russians, but alignment with the Italians and rapprochement with the British. Plainly, according to Jaeckel (and warranted by Hitler's actions both prior and subsequent to 1 September 1939), Hitler's "revisionism" extended the borders of the Third Reich well beyond the prewar frontiers of 1914, in particular, the Eastern Front (see 37-39). But regardless of the length of its piecemeal development (seven years, according to Jaeckel), its implausible absurdities, and its numerous oversights, Hitler's foreign policy exhibited such "a high degree of purposeful orientation, consistency, and coherence" as to discredit Hitler as strictly opportunistic, unless "this opportunism of cunning and lies was, first of all, one of principle" (42, 46). In Jaeckel's opinion, "few statesmen have ever pursued their goals with greater obstinacy or tenacity" (46).

Likewise, as part of his *Weltanschauung*, Hitler sought to eradicate the Jews. In other words, Hitler espoused a "rational as opposed to emotional or pogrom-oriented antisemitism" of the radical-conservative variety (49). Interestingly, Jaeckel outlines four aspects of what could be dubbed Hitler's neo-antisemitism: "its increased significance to Hitler himself; a new universalist-missionary element; its link-up with the outline of foreign policy; and, finally and

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above all else, an enormous radicalization of the intended measures” (53). Definitely, Jaeckel overstates the case for Hitler’s originality in these matters, except perhaps the latter two. But he focuses solely on Hitler’s antisemitism instead of its broader context. At any rate, he describes the logical execution of this twisted *Weltanschauung* in the three major phases of the Nazis’ Jewish policy: deprivation of civil rights, forced emigration and deportation, and the bloody final solution (61). To cap off his argument, Jaeckel notes:

This third and final phase, the bloody so-called final solution, was initiated on a large scale in the summer of 1941, significantly at the very moment when the war against the Soviet Union, the final solution of the grand design in foreign policy, was undertaken as well. In other words, the blueprints of Hitler’s foreign and racial policy reached their respective climaxes at precisely the same moment (ibid.).

But the undertaking of both aspects of Hitler’s *Weltanschauung* at the same time—war on the Eastern Front and the transportation and extermination of massive numbers of Jews—became logistically unbearable (61-62). Yet, in Hitler’s mind, he had promised such in his Jewry and international world war “prophecy” to the *Reichstag* in September 1939 (repeated frequently in public by Hitler, 62-66), so he would not avert or relinquish either of his twin goals.

Without question, Hitler subsumed the various tenets of the Third Reich’s domestic policy to his desire for German *Lebensraum* and his antisemitic intentions. But Jaeckel’s overall argument loses little of its potency, even though he concedes that Hitler’s internal policy exposed aspects of opportunism, namely, “the state as a means to an end” (chapter IV). By way of rebuttal to a charge of nihilistic opportunism in this domain of Hitler’s dictatorial rule, he indicates that the Third Reich followed quite principled measures in the *Fatherland* that

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produced “an obstinate, brutal, and finally self-destructive consistency” (67). Furthermore, Jaeckel’s elucidation of Hitler’s philosophy of history only solidifies his thesis that Hitler brought together under the broader rubric of a *Weltanschauung* both racial, antisemitic dogma and territorial, *Lebensraum* ideas. On this basis, *Hitler’s World View* offers the reader an understanding “of crucial importance” for both Hitler and a consequential part of twentieth century German and European history (121).