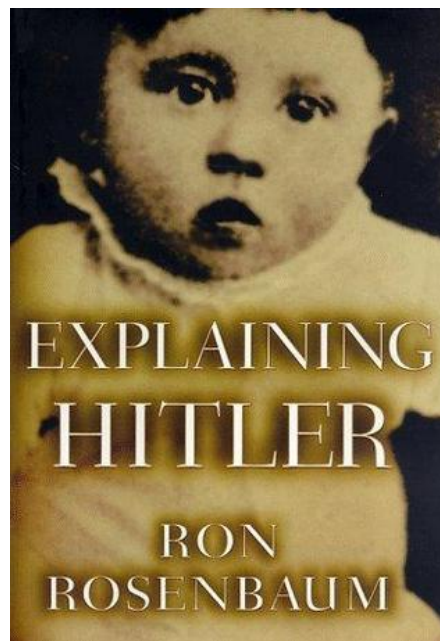




Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil

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When Hitler's war ended in 1945, the war over Hitler--who he really was, what gave birth to his unique evil--had just begun. Hitler did not escape the bunker in Berlin but, half a century later, he has managed to escape explanation in ways both frightening and profound. Explaining Hitler is an extraordinary quest, an expedition into the war zone of Hitler theories. This is a passionate, enthralling book that illuminates what Hitler explainers tell us about Hitler, about the explainers, and about ourselves.

Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil Details

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From Reader Review Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil for online ebook

Ivan says

Ho riletto il libro proprio in questi giorni, anche se per sommi capi, e mentre la volta scorsa mi ero più concentrato sull'apprendere dati, questa volta ho seguito più le indicazioni dell'autore, i suoi propositi. Nell'introduzione Rosenbaum dice infatti che vuole presentare le varie interpretazioni, i vari ritratti di Hitler dati via via dai vari studiosi visti come autoritratti culturali in negativo: "Quando parliamo di Hitler, parliamo anche di quel che noi siamo e non siamo".

Il titolo originale (ho visto sul web, perché nell'edizione che ho in mano non è dato) è "Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil". E in effetti il libro sembra voler indagare l'origine del "male Hitler", passando in rassegna una lunga serie di studi più disparati, pubblicazioni, esame dei testimoni (quelli ancora viventi negli anni 80-90) interviste agli storici etc., per gli anni di Hitler passati a Monaco dopo il 1918. Senza tralasciare la discussione e l'esame critico della vecchia tesi della patologia psichica del dittatore da rintracciare volta in volta nel passato familiare, nel rapporto con la madre, nel presunto sangue ebraico, nella presunta sifilide, o encefalite, nella sua perversione sessuale, etc.

La conclusione tratta dall'accostamento di tutti queste spiegazioni, interpretazioni, o autoritratti culturali, è che non vi è una spiegazione al male Hitler. Perché è successo l'Olocausto, e non solo. Non vi è una spiegazione, una teoria onnicomprensiva e convincente.

Interessanti, per me, le interviste allo storico Yehuda Bauer e al filosofo e teologo Emil Fackenheim riportate nella seconda parte del libro. In modo particolare il proposito di Fackenheim di non volere dare a Hitler una vittoria postuma nel dilemma del male ad Auschwitz e del silenzio e/o assenza di Dio. Ovvero nella equivalenza Dio=Hitler e Hitler=Dio, che in fondo è forse quanto voleva il dittatore nella sua smodata adorazione di se stesso: diventare Dio, signore della storia e del destino degli esseri umani.

Lobstergirl says

If this were "merely" a work of scholarly investigation - examining the writings of those who have tried to explain the evil of Hitler and the Holocaust - it would still be interesting, but not nearly as interesting as the book Ron Rosenbaum wrote. He adds a layer of journalism on top of a work of biography, history, and historiography, interviewing each of the Hitler "explainers" in person and helping us see their motives. The passive-aggressive Claude Lanzmann, for example. Lanzmann, the director of the hugely acclaimed 9-hour Holocaust documentary *Shoah*, had agreed to meet with Rosenbaum in Paris. But when Rosenbaum showed up at Lanzmann's address at the appointed time, repeatedly ringing the buzzer, calling Lanzmann from a nearby brasserie (this was the days before cellphones) and leaving messages, returning to ring the buzzer again, he got no response. On the way back to his hotel, he called Lanzmann one more time from a laundromat. This time Lanzmann answered, and was annoyed at Rosenbaum, insisting not only that he'd been in the building the whole time, but that he'd given Rosenbaum the access codes for the building's security keypad. Furthermore, Lanzmann said, too much time had been wasted and he could now no longer do the interview. After pleading from Rosenbaum, Lanzmann relented, but the interview was conducted with Lanzmann's ill-concealed hostility and belligerence hanging over it like a miasma. After this story, and another one in which Lanzmann publicly disrespected a Holocaust survivor at a conference, I understood why Rosenbaum used Hitler's baby photo for his cover; not just because it symbolizes better than any other image the lengths people will go to trying to explain the metamorphosis from innocence to evil, but because the image utterly pissed off Lanzmann, by evoking the mere notion that Hitler ever could have been

innocent, guiltless, guileless.

(In a delicious inversion, Rosenbaum also interviews the Holocaust survivor Lanzmann disrespected at the conference, who turns out to be so solicitous of Rosenbaum that he insists Rosenbaum write down the license plate number of his car so they won't miss each other at the train station.)

Also fascinating: the cult of Lacanian defenders that has grown up around Lanzmann. And: Lanzmann's ego. Lanzmann had attacked the film *Schindler's List*, writing: "After *Shoah*, certain things can no longer be done." Rosenbaum tries to clarify with his researcher: "You mean...after *the* Shoah, certain things are forbidden." (The Shoah is the Hebrew term for the Holocaust.) No, says the researcher, Lanzmann has clearly written, "after *Shoah*, after *his film*, certain things are forbidden." There's much more on Lanzmann; suffice it to say that when you come off worse than a Holocaust revisionist like David Irving, you might have an image problem.

Rosenbaum's narrative of his discussions with the various historians of Hitler and the Holocaust is so fascinating that I was surprised to look back at the table of contents and realize this is only half the book. The first half delves into several topics: Hitler's relationship to his half-niece Geli Raubal, which is cloaked in mystery; it seems to have been sexual, or romantic, but was it also deeply perverse? Was Hitler a devotee of undinism, also known as urolagnia, or watersports? Did he have young Geli squat over his face and piss on him, causing her such psychological distress that she ultimately killed herself? Or did she kill herself for some other reason? Or did Hitler have her killed? There's more evidence for suicide than for murder, but we are talking about Hitler here, and when you talk about Hitler, it seems anything is on the table. One of the reasons Geli Raubal figures into Rosenbaum's narrative is that a number of figures, most of them Hitler's close associates, claim that Hitler was never the same after Geli's death. This seems to be an attempt to whitewash his pre-1932 life: Hitler was normal until Geli died, then something irrevocable was lost, something clicked in him, and he was capable of abnormality, perhaps even evil. Rosenbaum isn't buying it, understandably. What were the origins of Hitler's anti-Semitism? Did he have a Jewish grandfather? Was Hitler missing a testicle? This seems dubious, even though a 1945 Soviet autopsy on his exhumed corpse claimed he was, and the "one-ball theory" has been used to try to explain Hitler's evil. Rosenbaum delves at length into the courageous writing of the *Munich Post*, which for a decade before Hitler became Chancellor shone a spotlight on his violence, thuggery, and terror - having political opponents harrassed, beaten, killed. Rosenbaum stresses how Hitler and the thugs around him uses counterfeiting and blackmail incessantly. The *Munich Post* focused on Hitler's criminality; they understood that Hitler was not a *criminal politician*, but a *political criminal*.

Was Hitler sincere, or insincere? That is, should we take his words at face value, or as cynical manipulations of an easily-roused rabble? Rosenbaum interviews Hugh Trevor-Roper and Alan Bullock. Philosopher Berel Lang shocks him by opining that Hitler didn't do evil *despite* it being evil; he did it *because* it's evil. He spends time with David Irving, who explains that "What happened in the camps like Auschwitz and Treblinka was not murder except in the kind of generic sense that people were sent to camps where it was likely they would die" of starvation and disease. He visits Rudolph Binion, who is convinced that Hitler's anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust, can be blamed on the Jewish doctor who treated Hitler's mother Klara for breast cancer. We spend time with theologian Emil Fackenheim and historian Yehuda Bauer in Jerusalem. Bauer finds that Hitler can be explained, at least in principle. For Fackenheim, man cannot explain Hitler, only God can, but God hasn't revealed his explanations for such evil. Then we have the Cambridge University polymath George Steiner, who posits "the Jews' ontological responsibility for Hitler's crime." (Without the Jews, there would have been no Auschwitz. Please, don't ask me to explain. Yes, Steiner is Jewish. Yes, his parents were always just one step ahead of the Nazis as they fled Europe.) His line of reasoning, says Steiner, is "obscene yet accurate." Rosenbaum visits Hyam Maccoby, who finds Christendom to be the source of evil that resulted in the Holocaust. He attends a standing room only symposium at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum where Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's book is the center of attention and Goldhagen becomes the victim of a "scholarly wilding." Finally, though historian Lucy

Dawidowicz is dead and can't be interviewed, he examines her writings and finds she is the scholar who places Hitler's determination to exterminate the Jews earliest, in 1918, as he recuperates from war injuries in a military hospital; other scholars have opined that Hitler didn't give the OK for the Final Solution until 1941, and others still have never found Hitler's fingerprints thereupon.

To sum up, no review can do this book justice. It's a work touching not only on biography, history, and historiography, but also psychology and theology. Rosenbaum is a large presence in it, as he converses with his large cast of characters and notes his own reactions and opinions. I recommend it highly.

Matt says

There is a formulation, called Sayre's Law, that states: "In any dispute the intensity of feeling is inversely proportional to the value of the stakes at issue." This dictum has been used to describe the vicious infighting among professors; the territorial aggression of two brothers in the backseat of a car during a long roadtrip; and my battle with my wife over what to watch on television: *Buried Alive: Hoarding* on TLC (her choice) or *Hillbilly: The Real Story* on the History Channel (my choice).

In other words, people can get riled up over very, very small stakes.

Sometimes, compromise can be reached. For instance, my wife and I can usually come to an agreement to watch *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, thereby promoting peace in our time. Sometimes, however, there can be no compromise, no agreement, no peace. That's the case with Hitler explainers, or non-explainers, as the case may be.

Ron Rosenbaum's *Explaining Hitler* doesn't attempt to actually explain the man. It's not a handbook for funny mustaches and genocide. Rather, it attempts, in Rosenbaum's words, to explain the explainers. The Explainers (proper noun) are a disparate group of tweedy men with elbow patches and pipes and an immense lexicon of subtle-yet-slicing insults who somehow get paid to sit around all day and think and write and talk about Adolf Hitler. (The biggest question I had, at the end of the day, was "where do I sign up?")

Anyone who wants to understand Hitler, the man, need not consult this book. It won't help, and will most likely hinder. On the other hand, if you want to read about really smart men (and one or two women) wasting their vast intellects arguing minutiae about a goose-stepping mass murderer who's been dead 65 years, then by all means, have at it.

And yes, I count myself among the latter group.

Explaining Hitler is a loose, shaggy, hard-to-pin-down sort of book. It's part memoir and part travel log; part compendium and part synthesis; part history and part sociology; and partly about a dictator who might have had one ball.

Rosenbaum is a writer who I have enjoyed reading on the website Slate.com. In that forum, his dense, wordy, literate, highly intellectual pieces are more easily digested. In a book length format, it's a little harder going. Rosenbaum went to Yale, and I have the sneaking suspicion he's been starting decades-worth of cocktail parties with the phrase: "When I was at Yale..." He has annoying tics, such as using ten dollar thesaurus words over and over (either "acidulous" and "mountebank" are writerly crutches, or Rosenbaum just loves the way they roll off the tongue) or coining silly phrases and then repeating them throughout the book, as though he's just created the next "Show me the money!" He is very well read, and he is more than willing to let you know. So I hope you've brushed up on your philosophy and theology, because

there will be a test (but no bibliography, to which I say, shame!)

To be fair, though, Rosenbaum is a great tour guide. Knowledgeable, passionate, and even-keeled. He has an amazing way of always remaining the most moderate, reasonable, and logical person in any debate. I'm sure he's very irritating to argue with, and I mean that as a compliment.

The book is given its structure by the topics it chooses to tackle. These can be summarized as: (1) Hitler's background (the Jewish Ancestry Question); (2) Hitler's Mens Rea (whether Hitler acted with a consciousness of his guilt, or whether he thought what he was doing was right); (3) Hitler's paraphilias (a sorta gross, sorta hilarious attempt to reduce Hitler's actions to his outré sexual behaviors); (4) the Big Why (actually, an argument over whether it's okay to ask "why"); and (5) Who's to Blame? (that is, Hitler, the German People, or God). There are actually more sections in the book, but there is some bleed-over, and a few of Rosenbaum's discussions are actually more digressionary, which is not to say uninteresting.

The slowest going is at the start. These are the portions of the book dealing with the alleged Jewish ancestry of the Schicklgruber-Hitler family. Now, I'll admit, I'm not a big fan of geneology in general. Mostly because I find it embarrassingly hard to follow family trees. When I'm asked to remember lines of consanguinity, I usually have a terrible flashback to my first year Property course in law school. This section is enlivened, actually, but what I thought was Rosenbaum's best contribution: his highlighting of the Poison Kitchen. This was the nickname given a group of newspapermen who formed a sort of Weimar-era Gawker, except that instead of making fun of Conde Nast employees, these journalists raked mud in Hitler's face (and paid for it; paid dearly).

Rosenbaum follows this with a debate over Hitler's consciousness of evil, which boils down to a nerd fight between two distinguished English professors: the late Alan Bullock and the late Hugh Trevor-Roper. It is not so much enlightening as it is comforting - comforting to know that in some places, people get paid to wear herringbone, drink high balls, and snort contemptuously that *you would think that*.

The greatest disappointment I had was with the discussion of Hitler's alleged sexual "deviancy". In case you didn't know, many people have tried to explain Hitler's actions through the prism of sex, whether it be a sexual problem (monorchidism, impotence) or an outlandish fetish (pedophilia, undinism, incest). To attempt to explain Hitler this way is, obviously, hopelessly reductive. It would be laughable if it weren't so prevalent, and there's a lot of ways you can go here. For one, you can turn the theoretical lens back on the theorist, to study the pathology of anyone who thinks you can understand Hitler by determining whether he liked to give or receive a Hot Carl. Or, at the very least, you can relate some of the lurid "details" so I can be properly revolted. Unfortunately, the only story we get is a thirdhand account of Geli Rabaul urinating on Hitler's face (which actually sounds like wishful thinking). Mostly, Rosenbaum keeps a safe distance from this subject, making these sections as flaccid, allegedly, as Hitler's netherparts.

Explaining Hitler also gives a little time to Holocaust skeptics, chiefly, David Irving. This is sort of a sidetrack, since Irving isn't so much of a Hitler explainer, as he is a diminisher. Still, you got to hand it to Rosenbaum. He suppressed the urge to knee Irving in the groin, which must have been quite difficult.

Perhaps the most entertaining section of the book revolves around the insufferably arrogant Claude Lanzmann, the French (of course) director of the nine-hour documentary *Shoah*. Lanzmann believes that you should not be allowed to question the "why" of the Holocaust. If you do, Lanzmann will shout at you, as he shouted down an actual Holocaust survivor. Again, Rosenbaum's ability to not inflict physical harm on his interview subjects is commendable. In his place, it's very likely I'd be in a French prison for the high crime of "shoving one's beret down one's throat."

Explaining Hitler ends with a look at how various writers, thinkers, historians, and rabblers have dealt with the notion of blame. With the exception of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, I hadn't heard of most of these

people, and by this point in the book, I was tired of the esoterica. Yes, I discovered, even I have my limits as to the parsing of historical nuance.

I've read a lot about the Nazis and Hitler, probably more than is healthy, and I enjoyed Rosenbaum's take. It's a fresh way to look at things; to examine history not through the eyes of the historical figure, but through the eyes of those writing that figure. Ultimately, though, I found my understanding of Hitler diminished. He had become so abstract - a collection of lies, myths, conjecture, speculation, and sexual peccadilloes - that he wasn't a human anymore, or even a demon. He had transformed into that raving lunatic from those *Downfall* mash-up videos you can find on YouTube. A creature of ridicule and scorn who couldn't possibly have risen from the backwaters of Austria to lead the most powerful nation in Europe.

To me, the question of explanation is misplaced. I don't think it's impossible to determine Hitler's motives. I don't think it's impossible to determine whether he hated Jews or whether he was cynically using them as scapegoats; and I don't think it's impossible to determine why Hitler hated the Jews; and I don't even think it's impossible to reasonably infer what effect Hitler's misshapen scrotum had on his psyche.

But these aren't the important questions, are they? Having those answers wouldn't solve the Great Mystery. By this, I mean, a lot of people have a lot of crackpot notions. I once talked to a client who claimed to be a timeless angel who had swallowed the sun and spit out the Eiffel Tower (of all places).

The fact that Hitler wanted to annihilate the Jews is, sadly enough, not unique. The more important story, one that is much easier to piece together, but just as hard to fathom, is how this runty little crackpot with the stupid mustache and that weird forelock of hair, who loved dogs, hated Jews, and willingly allowed himself to be urinated upon, actually rose to the top and put his theory into practice.

Jessaka says

This was an excellent book. Rosenbaum was trying to explain Hitler and even put in notes that were in other books about Hitler, and how they tried to explain him. No one ever could, not even Rosenbaum.

At best I would say that like Donald Trump, Hitler was a buffoon. He was not taken seriously, until it was too late, and like Trump, Hitler was a liar, a psychopath, and a narcissist. Those are my own ideas, and I think maybe people would agree with me, unless they are pro Trump and/or Hitler.

I re-read an article by Ron Rosenbaum today. How much I wish my memory was as good as it was in the past. But in this article he is comparing Trump with Hitler:

<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/n...>

And when I re-read the article it seems even more prevalent than it did back when I first read it. And now I wonder what Ron Rosenbaum has written since then.

Hilary says

The intro was fascinating, and the info he analyzed was very interesting and personally done... but overall the author, Ron Rosenbaum, just repeated himself too much, like a bad mystery movie. Skim this book for the info, but don't plan on reading every word after the middle of chapter one.

Mary says

"Hmmm, let's see how I can make \$ without the effort, I know, I'll write about people who do real research!" This author comes off like that for me. Just rubs me the wrong way. Rosenbaum seems to see Hitler as something other than a human & assumes we all agree. Who exactly is guilty of the label "Untermenschen" then? OK, his book he can give his opinion, but must we hear about it over & over ad nauseum?

His pig-headed opinions are literally on every page & are distracting. Ex: he can't understand a journalist befriending a prophet/channeler & neurotically goes on & on about it since he otherwise admires the guy. Who CARES what Rosenbaum's spiritual beliefs are here?

Like the Seinfeld sitcom, here's a book about...nothing & replete with the same neuroses. Did she commit suicide, or did Hitler order Geli's murder, or did he murder her, or could she have killed herself, or....On & on, chapter upon chapter on this topic & in the end, nothing concrete or new to tell.

There are some interesting parts when he's interviewing the real experts on Hitler, but all in all I wouldn't recommend this book.

How can he get away with writing page after page about a photograph or 1932 newspaper article without including a COPY of it??

I'm tempted to think this book is an example of why Jews angered Hitler so damn much! There are far better bios & Nazi history books out there, so check them out first. Later you might pick this up to learn about the authors of the genuine Hitler books. This isn't one of them. It's more like the Larry King show in print. Entertaining, but too gossipy to merit a place beside Heiden's or Bullock's or Trevor-Roper's or Kershaw's or Speer's etc. work on Hitler.

Sorry, I'm just not impressed.

Nandakishore Varma says

Foreword to the Review

This review was posted over a period of 19 days, more like "notes for a review". My perception of the book has changed as I read on, and the afterword to the current edition, appended at the last, regrettably brought it down a few notches. IMO, victimisation in the past does not condone aggression and violence in the future.

But then, that's just me. I agree and accept that there are different viewpoints.

A few months ago, I got into a debate over *Er ist wieder da*, a satire on Hitler. A few GR members were up in arms against this book and its author for "humanising" Hitler: they condemned it without even reading it, because it is apparently blasphemy to think of Hitler as funny, even as a human being.

This got me thinking. However much we dislike to admit it, Hitler was a human being like you and me. And the evil that he did was not unique - so many dictators before and after have done the same type of atrocities - only, the scale in which he carried them out was unprecedented.

Antisemitism was present in Europe centuries before Hitler. He tapped into a convenient source and drew power from it. By assigning centuries of Jew-animosity to Hitler and Nazis alone, I feel that Europe is doing a bit of collective shadow-projection.

So I have decided to understand Hitler further, and chosen this book as a starting point. I may even go back and have another go at reading Mein Kampf. Don't get me wrong. I am not condoning or justifying Hitler - just trying to understand what made him tick.

Maybe like Manny warned, the spirit of Hitler may take me over and I may become the next universally hated and feared despot - but it's a risk I have to take!

05/04/2015

Hitler is explicable in principle, but that does not mean that he has been explained. - Yehuda Bauer

There will never be an adequate explanation. . . . The closer one gets to explicability the more one realizes nothing can make Hitler explicable. — Emil Fackenheim

According to Rosenbaum, the attempt to explain Hitler encounters three levels of despair. The first one is articulated by Yehuda Bauer; Hitler could have been explained, but his history has been muddled and all the first-hand experiences lost so that it is practically impossible. The second level of despair, as evidenced in the quote by Emile Fackenheim above, postulates that Hitler is a totally inexplicable phenomenon.

The third level of despair sees the attempt to explain Hitler as human being itself as an obscenity. This viewpoint is espoused by the filmmaker Claude Lanzmann. As Rosenbaum writes:

But Claude Lanzmann goes further even than that, goes deeper to a third level despair—to a revolt against explanation itself, to a personal war against the question Why. For Lanzmann, the attempt to explain Hitler is not merely futile but immoral—he calls the very enterprise of understanding obscene.

Interesting.

06/04/2015

It seems there have been a lot of attempts to cast Hitler in the role of victim, many of them Freudian. I have heard of the "abusive father" story, and the story of his supposed sexual ineptitude - but the legend of his testicle being bitten off by a billy goat is rather hilarious. Also, did his Jew-hatred arise from a Jewish whore who gave him a dose of clap? Seems too simplistic, and also like dangerous attempt to point blame back at the Jews ("a Jew was responsible").

But we get into real Dan Brown-esque territory with the legend of Hitler's partial Jewishness - of Jewish teenager who impregnated his paternal grandmother in her middle age. Apparently, Hitler knew about this, and reputed it vehemently: even allowed himself to be blackmailed so that the news will not come out.

This depends only on the uncorroborated testimony of Hans Frank, Hitler's lawyer, and its veracity is doubtful. However, if true, it will go a long way in explaining Hitler's unnatural hatred of Jews - like

conservative politicians who denounce gays, but are secretly gay themselves.

07/04/2015

The Munich Post, until their offices were trashed and reporters murdered or jailed, single-handedly carried out an anti-Hitler crusade. Unfortunately, the people did not pay enough attention, because for the curb in democratic freedom was accompanied by economic growth (shades of the same were visible in the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi in India, in 1975-77!). Martin Gruber, the *Post's* political editor, is a sadly forgotten hero and martyr.

It is interesting to note that how much of the Nazi propaganda was built on willful falsification of history, and how they achieved their ends through political blackmail. The image of Hitler that one sees here is not the one of the misguided zealot but that of a Machiavellian political manipulator, who used the disenchantment of the public with the Weimar democracy and the prevalent anti-Semitic sentiment for his own political ends.

11/04/2015

Question: Did Hitler believe what he was doing was right?

Hugh Trevor-Roper: Of course! Hitler was convinced of his own rectitude.

Alan Bullock: Of course not! The man was a perfect mountebank... using antisemitism for his own ends. Though in the end, he started to believe his own lies...

Nowadays, it is very difficult to believe Trevor-Roper's theory that Hitler was an idealist whose ideology was misplaced. His history up to the point when Nazis came to power was too calculating and crooked to fit the picture of a man driven by a vision. Also, he kept the enormity of his crimes secret from the world, as though he wanted no one to know. It makes more sense to assume that he used the prevalent antisemitism as a vehicle for his rise to power.

However, I believe Bullock may have been right in saying that ultimately he came to believe in his own superhuman stature. His mad grab for world domination and his stubborn refusal to see the writing on the wall are the hallmarks of a deluded individual.

13/04/2015

Perhaps the biggest scandal which could have undone Hitler is the death of his beautiful half-niece Geli Raubal, in his Munich apartment. According to official reports, Geli committed suicide using Hitler's gun to shoot herself, because he did not allow her to pursue a musical career in Vienna. But a lot of skeletons seemed to have emerged from the cupboard since then. Rumours have been rife that Hitler was carrying on an affair tainted by excretory perversions ("undinism" and "coprophilia" - that is, obtaining sexual gratification by getting one's partner to urinate and defecate on one) with her; and, as in the case of all Hitler rumours, with no corroborating evidence. However, a school of thought firmly believes that Hitler murdered his half-niece out of jealousy, when she tried to escape this intolerable situation.

In the post-war era of trying to find a psychological explanation for everything, it may be ironic or fitting that the theories of Freud, a gifted Jew who fled the Nazi empire, have been used to the maximum extent to explain Hitler's alleged sexual abnormalities as the reason for his monstrous behaviour. Apart from the ones quoted above, the story of the single testicle, his Oedipal attachment to his mother, the primal scenes he witnessed in the small apartment where his father may have abused his mother are all quoted as the reasons why Hitler became Hitler. Maybe there is a kernel of truth in many of them: or they are all attempts to find a

reason for his otherness, to avoid the possibility that Hitler may have been "normal".

15/04/2015

Rosenbaum says that there is a "Shadow Hitler" - explanations of Hitler which range from the fanciful to the outrageous. One of these which Rosenbaum spends a lot of time on, i.e. that Hitler had Asiatic (Slavic or Mongol) lineage as suggested by Dr. Fritz Gerlich based on the shape of his nose (using the Nazis' own methods of racist science in brilliant parody), I consider only as a savage lampoon. More interesting is the fact that Hitler secretly admired Genghis Khan, and was convinced that following his brutal methods of conquest will ultimately result in history looking at him in a favourable light as conqueror. This might have well happened had Hitler won the war.

The second argument that Rosenbaum examines in detail - that Hitler became a hater after Geli Raubal's death - I also dismiss along with him as nonsense. Hitler was not an embittered man, firing like a loose cannon. His psychopathology was planned and methodical.

17/04/2015

Now we come to two Hitler explanations to end all explanations. The one by Berel Lang is astonishing, and in my opinion, possible. Hitler did not kill Jews because he was convinced of his own rectitude: neither did he do it despite knowing it was evil. He did it **because it was evil**. In fact, evil for evil's sake, so far seen only in literary villains like Iago.

Even though this may seem far-fetched, it would go a long way in explaining the great care which was taken in the creation of the death factories - "the method itself was the madness", to quote the author - and attempt to erase all trace of them as soon as the war was lost. Lang puts forward the frightening hypothesis that Hitler and his cronies were artists one way or the other, and this was the art they excelled in: pure, unadulterated evil.

The second one, put forth by David Irving, is one of denial - the Holocaust never happened: if it did, it was accidental, and Hitler never knew of it. Even though many may adopt this as a political position (Iran is one prime example) or as a case genuine antisemitism (the many publicly deniers who privately believe it happened and delight in it), Irving comes across as a person who was genuinely conned by Hitler's inner coterie into accepting the Fuhrer's relative innocence.

18/04/2015

An epiphany! When I read about Claude Lanzmann's extreme stance that nobody should even attempt to find an explanation for Hitler, and also of his vile attack on Dr. Louis Micheels, an Auschwitz survivor who is genuinely interested in finding the reason for the Holocaust, I connected it up with Berel Lang's frightening theory of evil as an art form. Lanzmann, a Jew who never suffered, purports to set himself up as a world authority on who should think what about the Holocaust: his attitude, as explained by Rosenbaum, eerily parallels that of an SS guard in Primo Levi's memoir. I found similar also to the attitude here on GR that we are forbidden from making fun of Hitler.

An unpleasant memory, buried for a long time in my mind, suddenly surfaced. I was studying in the ninth grade. During lunchtime, kids with the innate propensity for cruelty that lies within us, tortured and killed a chameleon for fun. I was disgusted and fascinated at the same time. Even though I did not participate in the barbaric pastime, I could not tear myself away from the spectacle. It was the Hitler within me, the artist of evil.

IMO, this is why people like Lanzmann are so violent - they have glimpsed the beast within, and afraid of its

deadly charm. So by negating it, burying it, they try to escape. For people like Dr. Micheels, who have seen the beast close at hand, this danger of identification does not exist, because they have been 'inoculated'.

The Holocaust would not have been possible without Hitler: he was the catalyst, the person who awoke the monster within the souls of human beings. The Jews were a convenient victim, objects of hatred already conveniently available. Hitler was the reason, but not the only one. If another artist of evil is born in today's world, another holocaust is possible, maybe with a different breed of victim - unless we recognise and internalise the beast within.

20/04/2015

In the final section of the book, Rosenbaum searches for the origin of the final solution: Was it Hitler's plan to kill off all the Jews in the world from the beginning itself, or did the madness grow on him? Or was it the circumstances which made Hitler *Hitler*, and he only a pawn? Did the Holocaust just happen?

There is the historian Yehuda Bauer, who believes Hitler is explainable in principle, though may not be in practice due to lack of historical data - however, he dismisses the idea of God unless as an evil entity who willed the Holocaust or as a weak figure who is powerless to stop it. For the theologian Emil Fackenheim, it is the opposite: Hitler is unexplainable, God works in mysterious ways: but to doubt the existence of God because of the death camps would be to grant a posthumous victory to Hitler.

There are four more widely differing explanations of the Holocaust put forth. George Steiner who says that the Jews exclusivity of themselves as the "Chosen People" singled them out (a sort of "blame the victim"); Hyam Maccoby who holds centuries of antisemitism in Christendom, and historic Christianity itself responsible; Daniel Goldhagen who holds German society responsible and Lucy Dawidowicz who places the blame squarely on the shoulders of Hitler, refuting theories that the "Final Solution" was a late decision - in fact, Hitler started the war to exterminate Jews.

The book ends with an interview with Milton Himmelfarb, whose quote "No Hitler, No Holocaust!" is very famous. In his opinion, understanding Hitler does not mean reducing him to the ordinary - you should still be able to *hate* Hitler, even if he is explained. I quote the concluding paragraph of the chapter in full:

Not to resist all or any inquiry, not to resist thought, but to resist the misleading exculpatory corollaries of explanation. To resist the way explanation can become evasion or consolation, a way of making Hitler's choice to do what he did less unbearable, less hateful to contemplate, by shifting responsibility from him to faceless abstractions, inexorable forces, or irresistible compulsions that gave him no choice or made his choice irrelevant. To resist making the kind of explanatory excuses for Hitler that permit him to escape, that grant him the posthumous victory of a last laugh.

I do not agree with this view. I do not believe in good and evil as absolute constructs, and I am highly sceptical of the concept of free will. But that is beside the point.

At the very end of the book, Rosenbaum comes to the same conclusion as I did - Hitler as an artist of evil. Only thing is, I would add that I partially agree with Maccoby and Goldhagen also, of a society willing to accept that evil.

Had the book stopped here, I would have given it four stars: because in spite of all the repetition, Rosenbaum does a fine job of investigative journalism. However, in the afterword, he shoots off in tangents and begins attacking all and sundry who do not share his view of Hitler as evil incarnate, and... *those who criticise Israel* .

He denounces Chaplin and Roberto Benigni for making films about the Holocaust that are "feel good": and Spielberg for making *Schindler's List*!

The shock of the moral and historical idiocy of Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* "heartwarming" Holocaust fantasy still remains with me. (I wrote an essay about Chaplin and Benigni, whose triumphalist clowning at the Oscars, dancing not just on the chairs but, metaphorically, on the graves of the dead, I still find disgusting beyond belief. I called it "The Arrogance of Clowns.") It was probably Spielberg's *Schindler's List* that opened the floodgates for teary, uplifting Holocaust tales. As someone put it, Spielberg made a movie about one Christian saving 400 Jews instead of a movie about a continent of Christians killing 6 million. Not that the *Schindler* story shouldn't be told, but that one, the one that climaxed with a teary, colorful celebration of the *Schindler* survivors in the land of Israel, was given preeminence. A happy ending to a Holocaust movie!

He then goes into an understandable tirade about Holocaust Denial and (why I am not surprised?) the perfidy of Iran: but I was shocked at his concepts of "Holocaust Indifference" (not seeing it as a defining point of history) and "Holocaust Inconsequentialism".

The last one means that one does not condone acts from Jews (read Israel) which are a direct result of their experiences of the Holocaust. The specific instance quoted by Rosenbaum is the British Journalist Ian Buruma's criticism of Menachem Begin citing the Holocaust as one of his reasons to destroy Iraq's Osirak Fuel Enrichment Plant. Begin said that "in making a terribly difficult decision he knew would be (initially) condemned by most of the world, but he was thinking about the million and a half children murdered in the Holocaust". Rosenbaum says that instead of Begin, Buruma is to be condemned for criticising him.

Really? *So is any Israeli aggression justifiable because of the Jewish experience of the Holocaust, and their fears of its future occurrence?*

I am afraid, if we agree to this, **we grant Hitler that posthumous victory: the victory of hatred**. Instead, let us not continue to hate. Instead, let us learn to cry with the victims. As the Buddha said, compassion is the only valid emotion.

Chris says

The question of why is a powerful question. You can reduce anyone to a mass by simply repeating it. Of course, the drawback to such a question is the fact that some answers reduce things to a too simple answer or too make things too complicated. Or worse, offer an excuse. Sometimes the answer should be, as Rosenbaum argues here, because of evil.

That question of why is what makes us human; we must question why people break the role of humanity. But it can also cause others to feel that they have the be and end all of the question and any other why is wrong. This too is a strike against humanity.

Rosenbaum takes these points and traces the debate over what moved Hitler, why Hitler did. And boy, silly me just thought it was because Hitler was an evil jerk. Rosenbaum seems to reach this conclusion too.

Declan Mcdermott says

This is the most presumptuous attempt at a biography I have ever read.

Jim says

The key word in the title is "Explaining." This is not "Understanding Hitler," but rather a historical survey and comparative discussion of how historians, scholars, philosophers, filmmakers, and others have attempted to explain the monstrous unfathomable evil perpetrated by this man. The discussion is lively and clear. The book is well-written. Rosenbaum explores his subject through the sometimes violently contradictory opinions of others.

Audra says

BotNS 2015 Summer Bingo - A Book That I Started but Never Finished

Not sure why I put down this book, but I am so glad that I picked it back up. This book did not explain Hitler because there really is no explaining of such an individual but it gave so much information and insight not only into Hitler but also into Europe and how something so unspeakable could occur.

Matt McCormick says

Gave up reading this after about 50 pages. The author just rambles on and on and is very repetitive. There is very little structure to the book. Didn't see much point in continuing.

Sandy Jones says

This book is interesting. It presents many different explanations for how Hitler became Hitler. Most of this book was interesting to me, but there were some parts which made me angry. I had to really process what was going on to make me respond so emotionally to certain scholars. This is the first book that I have ever read on this subject matter and felt that it did a great job summarizing the different perspectives which are out there. I admit that it took me many months to finish this book. Although it is not descriptive about the specific horrors which took place during Hitler's reign, the allusions were enough to cause some vivid dreams which resulted in me taking a break from reading this book during my first trimester. All in all, I would recommend this book to anyone interested in learning more about how different scholars view the development of Hitler's evil.

Paul Bryant says

Everybody steals this phrase now so I'll steal it too - the subtitle of this facemelting book should have been **what we talk about when we talk about Hitler**. Because that's what it's about. This is a great journalistic whistle-stop world tour of Hitler scholars and Hitler theories. And oh my my, what cans, and what worms crawl out of them.

Where can we start? Well how about this - most people would see in him the absolute embodiment of as pure an evil as we have experienced in history so far, but there's a remarkable reluctance in modern scholars to agree. The scholars pose the question: did Hitler do wrong knowingly? Often historians are emphatic that Hitler was convinced he was doing GOOD (saving the world from a scourge, saving the Aryan race). Real evil was to be found in the middle managers of the Holocaust, like Eichmann, who knew they were murdering innocents, but did so for motives such as career advancement. So that's interesting - imagine the headline in the Daily Vulgarian :

Hitler Not Evil Says Historian

Moving on, this book asks of its big-name interviewees the question "Where did Hitler's pathological hatred of the Jews come from?". We get a whole pick and mix of theories, many of which are concerned with finding a handy Jew to blame. Did a Jewish prostitute give Hitler **syphilis** in Vienna? Well, maybe. Did Hitler believe his paternal grandmother was seduced by a Jew? Well, maybe. Was there a Jewish doctor who bungled Hitler's mother's cancer treatment and made her suffer horribly? Well, **MAYBE**. Then along comes Hugh Trevor-Roper to propose that Hitler had no especial hatred of the Jews, he just hyped up the whole thing to get himself a political career. Imagine that - in this theory the other Nazis just took him far too literally! He must have been appalled! (It's okay, that theory has been rubbished by everyone else who's ever heard of it.)

The Hitler explainers are haunted by a notional **lost safety-deposit box** - you know, the one in which reposes the single piece of evidence which will explain everything. A document from a forgotten archive, a long lost unpublished memoir, a connection never made. Rosenbaum himself admits to "evidentiary despair" (a poignant phrase) - which means accepting the idea that the explanation will never be found. Yehuda Bauer, on the other hand, believes that Hitler and the Holocaust are explicable, but no, we haven't explained them yet.

Claude Lanzmann presents a bracing alternative to all this thrashing about. He baldly states that certain things are forbidden :

Psychohistory is a figleaf for revisionism

He goes further than just stating that to explain is the same as to understand is the same as to justify, by stating that justification is the explainers' unacknowledged intention. Lanzmann was also apoplectic about anyone publishing baby photos of Hitler (as on the front of this book). Anything which humanised him was justification according to Lanzmann.

You pays your philosophical money and you takes your philosophical choice here, but every argument, when not risible, is at once intriguing and horribly disturbing. Some readers think this is a lightweight bunch of interviews. I think this book drives the scalpel down to the bone. It's not pretty but it's essential.

Jennifer says

I have to give this 4 stars because I learned a great deal from this book, and was reminded of a bit more that I once knew and had forgotten. And at times I had a lot of respect for our author, Rosenbaum, as he critically appraises the conversations and theses of the explainers he studies, bringing insights as he synthesises together what they argued. It is true that, more than simply enlightening us on Hitler, this book helps to probe the minds and motives of those who share our fascination with this subject.

The reservations expressed by some explainers are very easy to identify with (*don't dignify the man with judgements of political genius, - or don't attempt to explain him and his actions at all, as to understand Hitler is to bring him closer to common humanity, which means we all have the potential for evil, and we can't face that.. - or looking into his past to find a psychological explanation in a past hurt or experience is to commit the ultimate crime of excusing the man.. or this is totally alien to explanation, the man was satan.* or viewpoints of Hitler as a midwife, bringing to fruition the antisemitic feelings sweeping Europe at that time, and therefore just as an inevitable instrument of the people's will (and the reactions this theory engender) or even as the brilliant, calculating demon who carefully honed antisemitism to a point sharp enough to murder the jews *enmasse*.

These are all fascinating and the evidence and history incidentally brought to bear to support (by the explainers) or examine (by Rosenbaum) their logic is highly informative. But at quite a few stages in the book I felt irritated with Rosenbaum for what seemed like an hypocrisy - the criticism of others for speculation, yet the indulgence in it himself. The insistence that his explainers needed to conform to one or another theory, but should not come up with a combination of factors which they believed helped to explain Hitler's Jew hatred seemed petty and unreasonable, and occasionally the swipe at an explainer where the interview did not go well seemed unnecessarily personal and came close to ridicule (though not enough to make me actually disagree with Rosenbaum's arguments against their viewpoints!) Sometimes the extreme concentration on the cost of the Holocaust to Jewry, to the exclusion of all other deaths incurred at the same time, seemed a little bit limited and skewed, after all, the lives lost to Russia alone were greater in number than the Jewish deaths. Similarly irritating were the frequent claims by explainers (though subtly questioned by Rosenbaum) that this was the darkest chapter ever in human history (get out and read more widely!).

But overall, it was really interesting to see not only the theories about Hitler, but the reactions of the public to those theories, and even the motives and personalities of the explainers, along with the insights they brought, were truly worthwhile. Along the way a lot of European political and social history is covered, and a lot of Hitler's life, writings, confidences and speeches are analysed, which does probably as much to let you understand what a manipulator of image he was as it does to make you feel you understand a little of the personality involved.

Although I'd describe the book as a little flawed, it was very worthwhile, and written as a personal narrative punctuated by edited interviews, which made it much more readable to me.

Simona Moschini says

Utilissima summa storiografica da cui si evince come su Hitler sia stato scritto tutto e il contrario di tutto. E la verità, purtroppo, non può stare nel mezzo, soprattutto sulla vexata quaestio: ci era o ci faceva?

Perché è inutile esercitarsi in teoremi su traumi infantili o bellici, se poi l'analisi dei suoi discorsi pubblici e privati mostra in generale una coerenza granitica fin dal 1923 circa.

Una lettura raffinata e affascinante, oltre che funzionale a introdursi al mare magnum degli studi sul personaggio. Idealmente, si potrebbe gemellare con il romanzo "La parte dell'altro" di Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt, che invece di sventagliare le ipotesi degli storici, mette in scena un come-se niente affatto superficiale.

Three says

Years ago, at a flat-warming party, I was taken to task for having a biography of the religious fundamentalist Ian Paisley - the false assumption being that having a biography of someone means sharing/validating their beliefs or actions. No fan of Paisley, I was interested to know more about him to understand how so many people on the small island of Ireland could support his bizarre ideology (he is on record declaring that the Pope is the Anti-Christ - a popular belief in the 17th Century, but slightly less so in the 21st).

Having a book about Hitler on your bookshelf is, in the same vein, problematic and so much more so given the growth of neo-fascism and holocaust denial Worldwide. Rosenbaum's book, though is worth any embarrassment its presence on your bookshelf may cause.

The reality is that this book is far more about the historians who have written about Hitler than it is about the dictator. It's more about the philosophical questions that history writing raises than it is about the chronology of fascism.

Particularly fascinating are his interviews with Holocaust-denial poster boy David Irving, and that with George Steiner where they discuss his controversial novel *The Portage of A.H to San Cristobal*, but the whole book is brilliantly conceived and executed.

Iniville says

A friend sent me this one. Every argument you can think of - and then some. It will turn you upside down.

South Montana says

I'm halfway through this book; of course, from the title you'd expect this to be a riotous laugh-fest, but alas, it's arduous tramping through these dark and tortuous stretches of text. I am a long-time admirer of Ron Rosenbaum's writing, having enjoyed his columns in the New York Observer. Here, he explores a rather uncommon question: Take away the mishegas with the mass murdering, genocide and war-mongering, thuggery and wholesale slaughter, and ask yourself: Hey! Who exactly was this Hitler fellow? In the 150 out of 300 pages I've covered thus far, Rosenbaum distills the existing literature on the topic -- and there's more than I'd ever thought there would be. As Rosenbaum lays out here, the fact is that few people think about who Hitler was; you know, as a person. Most just assume he was, in two words, "evil personified." However, that doesn't really explain much. Rosenbaum explores the various theories that have been proposed to explain the origins of Hitler's rabid anti-semitism and murderous mindset, the most commonly-held ones hinting at either some deeply ingrained sexual depravity; a hatred of Jews stemming from a formative personal experience; and even Oedipal notions of Jewish lineage via illicit sexual congress involving his maternal grandmother. Occasionally, the book provides the twisty revelations of a detective novel, and Rosenbaum appears to lean, even as the clues emerge, toward the thinking that the darkest truth of Hitler is that the darkness in his soul is something we wish were there for that would keep this monster at arm's length from us.

What's most interesting about the book (thus far) is the historical context it provides to Hitler's personal

ascension in German and Austrian politics, for as it turns out, his rise owed a lot to street-level thuggery, personal betrayals and blackmails, and political assassinations. Also chronicled here are the popular sentiments among the elite that he was a buffoon not to be taken seriously. Rosenbaum follows the battle between Hitler and journalists at the Munich Post, who for years published truthful articles about his irrepressible sliminess; and Rosenbaum conveys the shock and defeat they experienced when he nevertheless rose to power and destroyed that iconic newspaper (imprisoning one of its editors in Dachau where he ultimately died).

Rosenbaum does a good job of putting various theories to the test: Did Hitler have only one testicle, and could this have explained his murderousness? Did he sexually humiliate the niece who lived with him to the extent that she either killed or herself or was killed by him?

And he emerges with some genuine, paradigm-shifting insights, such as the idea that Hitler's evil is evident not from the fact that he could murder innocent men, women and children by the millions, but from the fact that he couldn't. What he did, Rosenbaum explains, is to first de-humanize his victims. The death camps were about taking human beings and stripping them of every and any shred of humanity they possessed. He knew that he was doing evil; he knew that his victims were in fact people. In his chilling de-humanization of them via the death camps, he attempted to make them sub-human so that he could kill them.

Bettie? says

togs - home audio

I so want to get on with other reads but every time I go to put this on hold, the next MUST moment happens. This is gripping stuff indeed.

Whilst I do not tilt towards the notion of a supernatural version of evil (so I'd be the last person to consider the exorcist plan of action if you start spewing pea soup whilst neck twizzling), there is such a degree of badness in some tormented souls that evil seems to be the only way to describe them.

What Hitler Wants - Soviet Propaganda

Compelling this was however I have come away feeling very dirty; it's all too much for a person to bear. Bath-time with extra dollops of soap.
