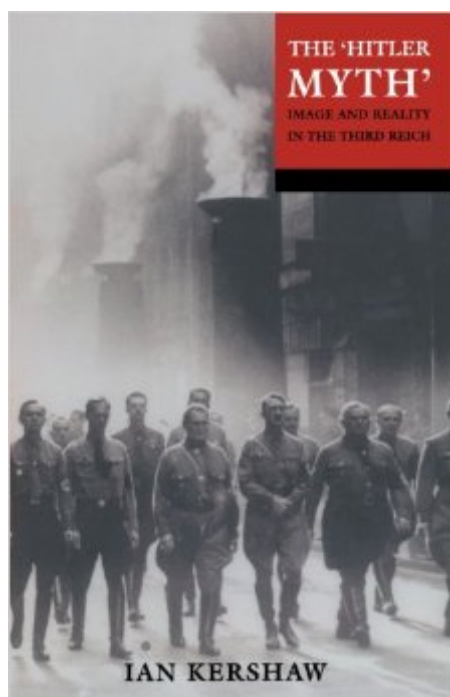


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The "Hitler Myth": Image And Reality In The Third Reich



Synopsis

Few, if any, twentieth-century political leaders have enjoyed greater popularity among their own people than Hitler did in the decade or so following his rise to power in 1933. The personality of Hitler himself, however, can scarcely explain this immense popularity or his political effectiveness in the 1930s and '40s. His hold over the German people lay rather in the hopes and perceptions of the millions who adored him. Based largely on the reports of government officials, party agencies, and political opponents, Ian Kershaw's groundbreaking study charts the creation, growth, and decline of the "Hitler myth." He demonstrates how the manufactured "Führer-cult" served as a crucial integrating force within the Third Reich and a vital element in the attainment of Nazi political aims. Masters of the new techniques of propaganda, the Nazis used "image-building" to exploit the beliefs, phobias, and prejudices of the day. Kershaw greatly enhances our understanding of the German people's attitudes and behavior under Nazi rule and the psychology behind their adulation of Hitler.

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Customer Reviews

"The Hitler Myth" is essentially a charting of the effectiveness of--though not an in-depth investigation of--the propaganda machine relative specifically to how the German populace viewed Adolf Hitler from the late 1920's through the duration of the war. Kershaw measures the propaganda machine's effectiveness through 1) opinion poll results, 2) voting figures, and 3) anecdotal documentation, especially reports from Nazi Party functionaries regarding what might today be

called "the word on the street." What ends up being Kershaw's most strongly stressed observation in the text is the persistence in Nazi Germany of public "excusability" of Hitler (my clumsy term, not Kershaw's) or a sort of "blame transfer" (again, my inadequate term) that existed relative to any negative news or regime mistakes. In other words, when things went wrong, the public--in a seemingly maniacal way--held onto a "BUT IT'S NOT THE FURHER'S FAULT" mentality.

Concomitant to this reality is the extent to which the Nazi Party was actually actively disliked by huge swaths of the population of Germany from quite early on (pre-war), and even more so by the beginning of hostilities with the Allies. Nonetheless, none of that displeasure seemed to get applied to Hitler himself until much, much later. Kershaw's fairly convincing stream of written evidence shows that the public persistently disassociated Hitler from the over-zealous policies, corruption, or flat-out bad ideas and brutish stupidity of the Nazi regime by assuming that Hitler was being misinformed by sycophants, or was being foiled by the pernicious British, or was simply too absorbed with genius foreign policy and thus distracted from domestic concerns, etc.

In the late summer months of 1933 and 1934, groups of German citizens flocked to Berghof hoping to catch a glimpse of Adolf Hitler walking through the countryside. Filled with a zealous belief for the 'Hitler Myth', post World War I Germany surrendered itself to Nazi propaganda. Responding to the humiliating treaty of Versailles and the economically unstable Weimar Republic, Hitler took on the Weberian characteristics of charismatic leadership. Unconditional loyalty and unquestioned faith in the Fuhrer rekindled historical notions of charismatic authority within the German psyche. Only after millions of European deaths and an Allied imposed peace could Germany finally tear itself away from the spell of Adolf Hitler. Unlike other chroniclers and scholars of the Nazi regime, Ian Kershaw in his book *The Hitler Myth: Image and Reality in The Third Reich*, examined the subtle distinction World War II German citizens carried in their assessment of Hitler and the Nazi Party. According to Kershaw, Hitler realized that the personality cult constructed around him could be used to cement the integration of the Nazi Party and the German populace. Indeed, the spell of Hitler or the myth of Hitler did not always exactly correspond with the German populace's perception of the Nazi Party. Throughout his well documented work, Kershaw makes the case that the 'Hitler Myth' held a different form of allegiance within World War II Germany. The 'Hitler Myth' unlike the Nazi party, prevented the German citizen from abandoning the Fuhrer in his quest for European dominance. It was trust in Hitler not in allegiance to the Nazi Party that propelled many German citizens to fight through World War II, despite food shortages and mounting casualties.

Historian Ian Kershaw, later to scribe a monumental two-volume biography of Hitler, here tries, in one of his early works on Nazism, to assess the creation, acceptance, and downfall of the "Hitler Myth" among the German people. In essence, the Myth of Hitler is that of a charismatic leader and hero of the people upon whom the people bestow traits, characteristics, and motives that simply do not gibe with the facts. The Hitler Myth reached its zenith in 1941 at the same time that the Third Reich was becoming the largest empire the world has ever known. Small wonder then that the German people supported Hitler in his ever expanding grabs for land and power. In this respect Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels' claim that he created the "Hitler Myth" may be a case of the tail wagging the dog. In any event, author Kershaw makes a marvelous attempt to understand how and why the Hitler Myth started, how it grew and was sustained, and what led to its destruction. In so doing he focuses not on Hitler the person as a myth but on the people who were the real source of the Hitler Myth, the people of Germany who bought into the myth. The basic resources for his analysis are based on two different, and competing, records. One major resource is internal reports of the government and Nazi Party agencies on the state of the attitudes, feelings, and morale of the German people. The other major resource is reports made by agents within Germany of the Social Democratic Party, initially as a party in opposition and then as a party in exile.

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