

Wolfgang Schieder, Ein faschistischer Diktator. Adolf Hitler Biografie, Darmstadt (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft) 2023, 272 S., 25 s/w Abb., ISBN 978-3-8062-4569-1, EUR 29,00.

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After the major biographies of Adolf Hitler published by Ian Kershaw, Peter Longerich and Volker Ullrich it is difficult to imagine that there is much left to say about his life in politics and war that has not already been said. Ralf Reuth has recently produced a stimulating study of »Hitler's Tyranny« that engages interestingly with key questions about the dictatorship. Wolfgang Schieder, a veteran historian of fascism, has not been put off by the sheer volume of historical literature on Hitler already available, but a new study can only be justified if it has something original and challenging to contribute. This is not something that Schieder has achieved.

It is difficult to understand the purpose of Schieder's biography beyond providing students and the wider public with a short textbook on Hitler and the nature of his dictatorship. In these terms the book is reasonable enough, covering the early years, the rise to power, the establishment of the dictatorship, the period of absolute authority, the nature of the *Volksgemeinschaft* Hitler sought to construct, and the path to wars that eventually led to the ultimate destruction of the dictatorship and Hitler's suicide. Some of the narrative is reasonably informed by the current literature, some less so, but the result is an account that is both conventional and sparse on details. The arguments, such as they are, convey what is by now well-known.

The starting point for Schieder is the assertion that Hitler was a »fascist dictator«. That may well be, but it is an assertion that evidently requires some definition of what is understood by the term. Merely claiming how much the Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini, influenced Hitler in his political adolescence is no substitute for some discussion of what a »fascist dictatorship« might be. There are analogies, just as there are differences, not least, as Schieder points out, the compromise Mussolini had to make with king, army, and church, while little constrained Hitler's establishment of absolute authority and a totalitarian regime. It is easy to label both dictatorships as fascist, a term often used too loosely in other cases to be analytically useful. But the comparison needs a solid foundation in a book that has deliberately titled Hitler as such.

When it comes to discussing the nature of the power structure under the dictatorship, Schieder writes in his introduction that he is working with certain set assumptions. These, too, are hardly novel – that Hitler operated both as a visionary with a loosely-defined



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Weltanschauung and as a practical politician; that he relied on a wider circle of political companions and networkers to make the dictatorship function; that Hitler was an autocrat who ruled over competing »polycratic« institutions and personalities; that the dictatorship was orientated towards war from the start; and that Hitler exploited luck (or »Providence« as he usually put it) when circumstances played in his favour. These are unobjectionable assumptions, but they are well-known and open to interpretation. Schieder has little to add that might alter the way the dictatorship has been viewed for many years.

Since half the life of the Third Reich was taken up by war, it is noteworthy that Schieder devotes only some 40 pages in the book to the years from 1939. In doing so, much of the political dynamic of the regime, and in particular Hitler's role as »first soldier of the Reich« (as he put it), gets shorter treatment than it deserves. In many ways the war was a serious test for the regime and its survivability. Mussolini was undone by the failures of Italian war-making by summer 1943, but the Hitler dictatorship survived until the very end, with German forces engaged in hopeless, suicidal resistance until the last moment. The phenomenon of German society faced with mounting crisis but nevertheless continuing to function in support of Hitler's war is one worth exploring in more detail, and it distinguishes the German example clearly from the Italian.

One factor common to the major biographies that already exist on Hitler is some attempt to explore his personality, and to inject the personal aspects of his history into the wider context in which he operated. Here, on the one hand, Schieder has shied away from discussing the person Hitler in any detail, so that the dictator becomes something of a cardboard character. In a sense the »cult of personality« contributed to the creation of an image that fed the public's desire to believe in Hitler as Germany's saviour, whatever the reality behind it. In addition, there is the problem faced by all biographers of Hitler that what is known of his personal life and his opinions is almost always second-hand, including the »Table Talk«, which is now the object of much critical scepticism.

On the other hand, any biography of a figure so historically significant must take account of the broader context and circumstances that Hitler faced. On the decision to invade the Soviet Union, for example, Schieder makes little of Soviet policy in 1939–1941, yet this was one element that turned Hitler to the idea of revising the geopolitics of the East in Germany's favour, sooner rather than later. Too often in the biography, Schieder has Hitler acting in something of a historical vacuum, when one characteristic feature of Hitler's political personality was to react to what others had done, rather than to take the initiative – true for example in the case of the Anschluss. Balancing biography against circumstances is a challenging task, but neither here gets quite the attention it deserves.



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If this is intended as a textbook, it needed a better editorial scrutiny for those who will be using it. There are small errors here and there, alongside old-fashioned assumptions. The Four-Year Plan is dated 1937 in places, the correct date of October 1936 in others; the Plan was intended for creating raw material substitutes, not armaments; the Munich Conference was September 29/30, 1938, not August; France did not guarantee Poland on 31 March, only Britain; British and French rearmament long pre-dated 1939; the bombing of Rotterdam was not »terror bombing«, but part of the military campaign against the Dutch army; and so on. These are small points, perhaps, but they betray a casual approach to the narrative that the putative readership does not deserve.

In a brief epilogue, Schieder asks whether there will be more Hitlers. He concludes that the fascist dictatorship practised by Hitler is now passé, but that understanding past dictatorships must help in preventing the dictatorships of today. That may well be true, but it has not prevented the emergence of a world of authoritarian states spread across Eurasia and elsewhere in the past decades, where knowledge of Hitler is neither here nor there. Schieder's brief biography is unlikely to alter that reality.



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