

Volker Ullrich, Adolf Hitler. Biographie. Die Jahre des Untergangs 1939–1945, Frankfurt a. M. (S. Fischer) 2018, 893 S., 43 s/w Abb., 7 Kt., ISBN 978-3-10-397280-1, EUR 32,00.

rezensiert von | compte rendu rédigé par
Mikael Nilsson, Stockholm

Volker Ullrich's two-volume biography of the dictator and anti-Semitic mass murderer Adolf Hitler is one of the most ambitious thus far. Ullrich's 2nd volume deals with the period 1939–1945 and the explicit focus of the book is, naturally, the Holocaust, and the author masterfully illustrates in great detail how this unprecedented genocide was planned and executed by Hitler and the other leading Nazis. However, the reader who expects to find out the truth of the »private« Hitler, which Ullrich explicitly claims to reveal, will nonetheless be sorely disappointed. But Ullrich urges us to once again put Hitler back in the center of analysis; the explanation of the war and the Holocaust can ultimately only be found in the dark abyss of Hitler's mind and personality, he convincingly argues. Ullrich also argues against the idea that the German generals were widely opposed to the way Hitler conducted the war; a postwar myth spread (not least by OKH Chief of Staff Franz Halder) to relieve the generals of responsibility for the mayhem that the war created.

The book is far more detailed than Peter Longerich's biography, provides a much broader coverage than *inter alia* Wolfram Pyta's and Thomas Weber's books, and it is a much-needed update of Sir Ian Kershaw's equally ambitious two-volume biography from 1998/2000. In terms of being a history of Nazi Germany it falls short of both Richard J. Evans' trilogy (not surprisingly) and Michael Burleigh's history, but is better and much more detailed than Frank McDonough's recent book »The Hitler Years 1933–1939«.

It is indisputably the best summary of the current state of Hitler scholarship available at the moment, and likely for the foreseeable future. In terms of new research, however, this volume (like the first) does not offer any real originality or a substantially new contribution to the understanding of Hitler. Ullrich's contribution to the field is not in uncovering new source material (like Wolfram Pyta or Thomas Weber), or a new interpretation of Hitler's murderous regime. This is true even though the book is by no means simply a summary of published previous research; Ullrich refers to many primary documents but only from German archives.

The focus is thus on the internal German view of the regime's activities. Materials also in other countries that could have given Ullrich the possibility to shed light on the same aspects of Hitler's reign but from a foreign perspective are thus not used. Instead, Ullrich becomes wholly dependent upon secondary literature when it comes to the foreign actors and their view of Hitler and Nazi Germany. This is not a massive problem, and each historian has to choose which material to include and we cannot demand any one single person to be able to read e. g. not only German and English



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

but also Russian and Italian, but it would nonetheless have made the book even more initiated and well-researched if some material from archives in other countries had been used. The book is clearly written for a German audience first and foremost although it has since been translated into several other languages and it has been well received internationally (as it should).

Granted, it is not an easy task to be truly original in this field. Instead, the value of this biography lies in Ullrich's extraordinary ability to summarize the great body of scholarship on Hitler and Nazi Germany that exists to date and to present it in easily accessible and attractive prose. Themes that get a lot of attention in this book are, naturally, the war and, as already mentioned, the mass murder of Jews, Sinti and Roma, the disabled, and Soviet POWs. What does not get as much attention are topics such as the domestic economy, social policies and daily life in Nazi Germany, gender relations and policies, art and cultural policy, occupation policies in various countries, issues related to ideology and propaganda et cetera. The focus is thus rather traditional, but overall it is an excellent book that everyone interested in the subject should read.

That being said, there are still some poignant problems with the book. He uncritically cites many sources that are very problematic, e. g. Hitler's so-called table talks and Albert Speer's memoirs and purported diaries from Spandau. The table talks are not ad verbatim records of Hitler's words, and cannot be quoted as such. Even though this has been established by recent research published after Ullrich's book one could still have expected a more critical approach. Speer's unreliability, on the other hand, has been well known for several decades by now so it is surprising to find Speer cited as a truth witness. Speer's published diary was not written while in prison in Spandau but after his release in 1966 with considerable cooperation from Joachim Fest. It is unclear how much this actually corresponds to Speer's original entries. Ullrich also cites the private letters between Martin and Gerda Bormann even though these thus far only exist in English as »The Bormann Letters«, without mentioning this fact and the possible problems with this source and their translation back into German.

Indeed, there is little in the way of source critical discussions included in Ullrich's book. These kinds of discussions are generally missing in the literature and it is a shame because there are too many sources used in Hitler studies that are highly problematic. We in fact know much less than we think about Hitler, because much of what we think we know is based on unreliable sources. The book is well-researched and well-sourced so there is really no reason not to include such discussions at least in the endnotes. There are also certain topics that are, if not completely ignored, then at least very clearly marginalized. One such topic, which could certainly be rewarding to explore, is the rather massive scholarship on Hitler's religiosity; and the religious influences on, and religious content of, National Socialism. This deserves more attention in a biography that attempts to give us a complete picture of Hitler's mind. Ullrich's biography is by no means alone in not tying these bodies of research together; it is something that all



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Hitler biographies, and also most histories of the Third Reich, do not do.

All in all, Ullrich's biography is an easily accessible, well-written, and very informative history of Hitler and his regime. It is a must-read for anyone interested in this subject. Even so, it is unlikely to be a bench-marker in the scholarly community in the same way as the biographies from Fest and Kershaw. The reason for this is two-fold: firstly, there are simply too many biographies written by now and secondly, it does not add significantly enough in terms of either originality, interpretation, or primary sources for it to become a true classic in the field. However, while scholars will continue to produce books about Hitler it will likely be many years before a similarly ambitious and knowledgeable biography is published again.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)