



The "Hitler Myth": Image and Reality in the Third Reich

By Ian Kershaw

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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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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Before writing the first volume of his substantial biography of Adolf Hitler, Ian Kershaw focused on the popular appeal of the Nazi dictator in *The "Hitler Myth"*. Arguing that "the sources of Hitler's appeal must be sought ... in those who adored him, rather than in the leader himself," Kershaw shows how Hitler's public image welded together antagonistic forces within the Nazi state, mobilized the nation for war, and contributed to the ethos that animated systematic and genocidal violence.

Responding to historians who maintain that Hitler's personality or ideological fixations accounted for his broad acceptance, Kershaw argues that, in the early 1930s, a sizable plurality of Germans hungered for an omnipotent *Führer* to stand above the political disharmonies of the Weimar state. Later, foreign policy and military victories attracted many more to the Hitler legend. However, victories were the price for popularity; and Hitler became more and more bloodthirsty as both his image and regime foundered under the blows of the Allied powers. The Hitler myth, then--a cultural phenomenon the Reich Minister Joseph Goebbels claimed as his greatest propaganda triumph--became a fundamental cause for the collapse of the Nazi State.

Kershaw's authoritative history of political culture in Hitler's Germany forcefully demonstrates that the *Führer*'s popularity rested less on "bizarre and arcane precepts of Nazi ideology than on social and political values ... recognizable in many societies other than the Third Reich." In our present political environment, which repeatedly features outcries for "leadership" from pundits and public servants alike, the disturbing lessons of *The "Hitler Myth"* are an urgent warning. --James Highfill

Review

"The strength of Kershaw's study is that he moves beyond a description of the construction of the 'Hitler myth' to analyze its strength and resiliency."--*The Richmond Times-Dispatch*

Language Notes

Text: English, German (translation)

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Sandra Murray:

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