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# Demystifying Hitler's *Mein Kampf* One Annotation at a Time

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## Abstract

This paper looks at the critical edition of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* that was published in January 2016 after the copyright on the original text expired. The editors of this historic publication have worked hard to appeal to the broadest possible readership, using the peritextual features of the two volumes to distance it from publications during Hitler's lifetime. This article gives a broad overview of reader reviews, by both intellectuals and members of the general public, and ultimately asks if the continuous ban on other republications of *Mein Kampf* is necessary and if it is rooted in governmental welfare or in worries about appearances and sensibilities.

**Keywords:** Hitler's *Mein Kampf*; critical edition; Peritext, Censorship, Readership.

## Introduction: *Mein Kampf* – Not just any book

Published in 1925 by the Franz Eher-Verlag, the central publisher of the National Socialist German Worker's Party, Hitler's *Mein Kampf* described the author's youth, his experiences during WWI, the initiation of the NSDAP, and included the party's political programme, i.e. the author's demands for expanded Lebensraum for Germans in the East, and his anti-Semitic and anti-Marxist and Socialist views together with conspiracy theories based on the anti-Semitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

The reputation of the text and the strict ban on any form of its republication in Germany since 1945 helped turn it into a toxic curiosity which would become part of the nation's guilt

and culture and therefore aid its self-conception. Growing up in Germany in the 1980s and early 1990s one would hear rumours about neo-Nazis importing Hitler's text in special editions from other countries that did not mind publishing what Ronald S. Lauder called the "playbook for World War II and the Holocaust" (World Jewish Congress 2016). The text had turned into a myth.

The 31 December 2015 was the beginning of a new chapter in the surprising lifecycle of *Mein Kampf*. It was the day its copyright – which had been held by the Bavarian Ministry of Finance – expired. Historians working for the Institute for Contemporary History have spent years working on a critical edition of *Mein Kampf* that the Institute self-published in January 2016, trying to demystify the book that to this day causes great pain to survivors of the Shoah and to Germans alike. This critical edition – including illustrations, maps, analyses and about 3,500 annotations - is the first of its kind and marks the first time that *Mein Kampf* has been published in its entirety since its last publication in 1944. This project has not been met with universal acclaim and the Bavarian government even withdrew its backing after Bavaria's premier Horst Seehofer met with Jewish leaders and heard their concerns (Range 2014).

Seven months after the publication of the critical edition it is time to analyse which steps the editors have taken to demystify *Mein Kampf*, to see how the readership reacted to the critical edition, and to find out what future lies ahead for the ban on reprints.

### **Working on Perceptions: Peritextual Features**

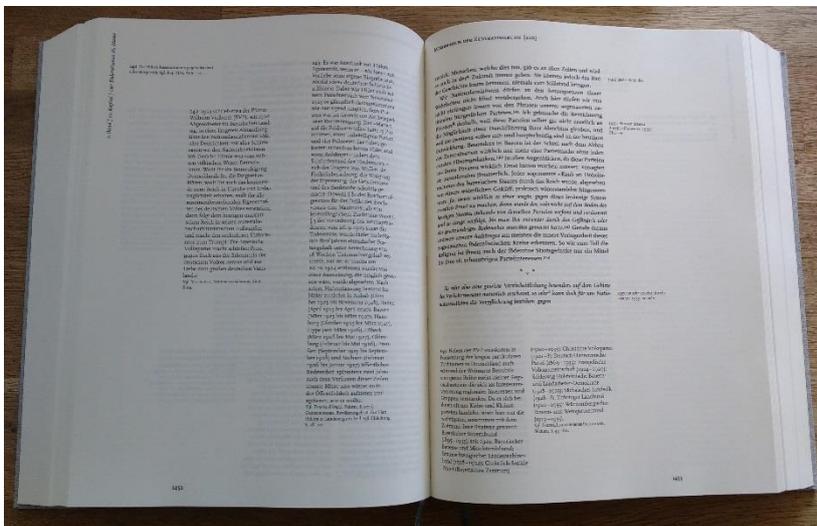
One part of the demystification process has to be done by working on peoples' perceptions, including analysing what Gerard Genette called the *paratext* of a book, i.e. everything that is added to a text by the editor, publisher, designer, printer and bookbinder. According to Genette the paratext of a book is a composite of *peritext* and *epitext*. Textual and non-textual material that make the public aware of the existence of a book – such as interviews, marketing material, reviews, etc. – form the epitext, whereas cover design, typeface,

format, and everything else the author had little or no input on from the peritext. Peritext and epitext “surround [a book] and prolong it, precisely in order to *present* it, [ ... ] to *make it present*, to assure its presence in the world, its ‘reception’ and its consumption” (Genette 1991, 261). In this context it should be understood that the critical edition intends to distance itself as far as possible from any of the original *Mein Kampf* publications.

The critical edition consists of two oversized hardcover volumes, cost effectively priced at 59 EUR to make it affordable for interested individuals, teachers, academics and libraries. The large format was chosen wisely and has – in comparison to what Genette suggested for most books of today – paratextual value. *Mein Kampf*'s first edition also appeared in two large format volumes but Hitler and the publisher quickly realised that the standard bible format (12 × 18.9 cm) would be more suitable for a popular edition. And indeed, the two best known surviving editions are “pocket-sized” books, one covered in blue linen (sometimes seen with Hitler's portrait on the dustjacket) and the so called “wedding edition” partially bound in leather. Genette referenced that the pocket book size did “constitute an undeniable selling point “ in the 1930s (Genette 1997, 19), an argument illustrated in a documentary about *Mein Kampf* produced by Hitler's propaganda machine, which used images of “Volksgenossen” of different social standings in different circumstances reading pocket-sized editions of the publication (Hartmann et al. 2016a, 2:1759). Genette (1997, 18) pointed out that publishers traditionally used larger formats for serious publications. The critical edition refers itself back to this tradition and makes the format one of its own selling points. It does not want to be carried around and read at the bus stop. It wants to be taken for what it is: a piece of academic work to be studied and used for reference.

Both volumes of the critical edition are covered in mute grey linen to promote durability but also to avoid attracting attention (Hartmann et al. 2016b, 1:79). The two volumes will easily “disappear” on one's bookshelf if this is what is desired. The cover states the title of the book including the volume, and on the same level the names of the editors. One could argue that it was a mistake to print the first part of the title, namely *Hitler, Mein Kampf*, in bold

letters, somehow stressing the first part. Further down below, where we would usually find the name or emblem of the publisher, we find a note that this edition was commissioned by the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich and Berlin. All writing is held in brown, set in two different fonts: the title in serified typeface, the names of the editors and the commissioning agency in non-serifed typeface. The back cover is kept free from any writing as are the inside front and back covers. The spine states the title of the book, the volume and the name of the Institute.



A page from the critical edition with Hitler's original text on the right and annotations on the left and in the space around the text.

The critical edition offers several layers of text. The first layer is *Mein Kampf* itself; it is the basis for everything to come. This text is presented on right-hand pages in Scala Serif bold. Next come the annotations consisting of text criticism and classifications. They are

arranged in a more complex way, around the basic text in Scala Serif on both the left-hand pages and in the space left over on the right. According to Hartmann (2016b, 1:75) the concept of presentation is taken from annotated bibles and the Talmud in which interpretations are arranged next to and around the basic text to improve readability, usability, and to allow for an easier search of information.

Paging is done twofold: The page numbers of the original text is kept with its original page numbers but put in brackets to allow for easier referencing. The overall page numbers of the critical edition are kept at the bottom of the pages. The third text layer that frames the first two consists of foreword, preliminary remarks, historical background, explanations about Hitler's way of writing, self-conception and -presentation, details about *Mein Kampf*,

contextualisation of the critical edition (Volume I), acknowledgments, photos and maps, a list of translations up until 1945 including the name of the translator and the publisher, list of abbreviations, references sorted according to when they were published, indices (Volume II).

The positioning of those “official” (Genette 1991, 267) peritextual features are proof of the reference book character of the critical edition. However, the editors have gone further and have put in a lot of thought into typography. Using Unger – the original font – seemed inadvisable since it might be illegible for modern readers and give the impression of promoting original publications. Trump-Antiqua was another font considered but ultimately rejected after it had been discovered that Georg Trump had relations to the Third Reich and this was to be avoided (Hartmann et al. 2016b, 1:75–79).

### Readership and Reception

The Institute for Contemporary History website states that the critical edition is meant as a tool for political enlightenment. It is targeted at the broadest possible readership, and both intellectuals and members of the general public have voiced their opinion – some having seen and investigated the actual volumes, some without having had the interest or opportunity to look into them.

British scholar Jeremy Adler has expressed outrage over the re-print of the original text which he calls the absolute evil which one cannot annotate (Adler 2016). In an interview with Jasper Barenberg, Adler states that *Mein Kampf* still has the potential to do harm and that he would have preferred brief brochures with explanations of the text since “the text is already out there and therefore known”. Aforementioned Ronald S. Lauder states similarly: “Unlike other works that truly deserve to be republished as annotated editions, ‘*Mein Kampf*’ does not. Already, academics, historians and the wider public have easy access to this text” (World Jewish Congress 2016). Both scholars miss the obvious: *Mein Kampf* has not been available to the general public per se. Teachers could not just download excerpts

off the internet or use foreign editions to discuss them with their students because that would have been a criminal offence under Germany's law on incitement of the people.

Historian Wolfgang Benz, has given the critical edition a thorough analysis and has argued that several annotations should not be included while others that should be included have been missed. He has also questioned the point of the critical edition: Historians already had access to most of the documents mentioned, and the length and depth of the two volumes means that few students will be able to engage critically with the work. He also doubted that the project will "cure anyone from anti-Semitism" (Benz 2016). In reference to the cover design journalist Götz Aly described the critical edition as wrapped in "soldierly field grey linen" as worn by German soldiers in both World Wars with writing held in "subtle SA brown". He also criticised the annotation and reference system as being "reader unfriendly" (Aly 2016).

Sven Felix Kellerhoff, journalist at German newspaper *Die Welt* praised the work but wished it had been published five, ten or 20 years ago to help to process Germany's dark past (Kellerhoff 2016). German academic Gert Ueding stated that the critical edition has exposed all of *Mein Kampf's* components and has thereby explained the National Socialism's symbol of power to its full recognisability. In his opinion the critical edition will from now on be the basis for any further engagement with *Mein Kampf* (Ueding 2016).

Readers of German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* have voiced their opinions in many letters to the editor (Rigo, Maul, and Heinz 2016). Reader Franz-Joseph Rigo saw the critical edition as honourable endeavour and stated that it offers "both the poison and its antidote". A certain Heinrich Maul did not mind the publication of the critical edition but did not agree with using it in schools. Reader Ingo Heinz agreed with a minority of "diligent" booksellers who refuse to stock the critical edition and was convinced that the editors' actual goal was promotion for the Institute for Contemporary History.

More heated – but not necessarily better informed - discussions take place in the customer review section of the Amazon.de product website. Reviewer A C. Bock praised the

production values of the critical edition but criticised “the infantilising of the German public”. T. Hugel criticised the lack of readability, while Joe6Pack called the project an “editorial overkill” and complained about the weight and format which does not allow for casual holiday reading. Heimkehrer wished for an eBook version which would allow him to take the books along with him. Customer Steven Pfahl praised the editors’ work and Profknox criticised Amazon reviewers who saw the critical edition as an act of infantilising and thought-policing but lacked the interest to read the two volumes himself. A customer calling himself Walter Cronkite praised the critical edition for its production quality and excellent introduction to *Mein Kampf*. Customer CS described the two volumes as “beautiful” and the typeset as a “masterstroke”. Several customers recommended interested readers to get the original text either from international Amazon sites or as eBook from the internet.

Interestingly, German right-wing newspapers seem to avoid taking part in the discussion. A search through online archives of the nationwide published *Junge Freiheit*, *Zuerst!* and *Deutsche Stimme* has only produced one article on the critical edition from 2009. This might be proof that Hitler’s text has lost its importance for the far-right of today, or that the editors have eliminated every opportunity of misinterpreting the text but it might also be the calm before the storm. At least one publisher with neo-Nazi past has declared his plan to publish the original text without “do-gooder commentary” (*Jüdische Allgemeine* 2016).

### **Censorship or Governmental Welfare: The continuous ban of *Mein Kampf***

In her book on censorship Sue Curry Jansen introduced the concepts of constitutive and regulatory censorship. According to her, the powerful “invoke censorship to create, secure, and maintain their control over the power to name. This constitutive or existential censorship is a feature of all enduring human communities – even those communities which offer legislative guarantees of press freedom” (Jansen 1988, 7, 8).

In reference to *Mein Kampf* it was the copyright that made the constitutive ban on republications possible. Now Germany is basing the continuation of the ban on two sections of its penal code: §86 StGB (dissemination of means of propaganda of unconstitutional organisations) and §130 StGB (incitement to hatred against segments of the population). However, these two sections were not invoked on texts by more eloquent members of the Nazi movement: Propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels's diaries, for example, have long been available in their entirety. His speech in Berlin's Sportpalast, which had a huge impact on the German public, has been part of the public consciousness since its first broadcast in 1943. It is even being used to teach German students about the art and power of rhetoric (see Currilin 2005). The use in school is key. Without confrontation with key texts of the era, young people will not and cannot understand why *Mein Kampf* had such impact on the public and how Hitler and his party could cause so much hatred, destruction and death. The level of hypocrisy about which texts the general public is allowed to read and which have to be kept in the poison cabinet can be seen as one of the signifiers Jansen has identified as signs of censorship (Jansen 1988, 8).

During the press conference held on the day of the critical edition's publication, Hitler biographer Ian Kershaw commented on the ban which he has long seen as problematic: "Censorship [ ... ] merely contributes to creating a negative myth, [ ... ] and inspires an unavoidable fascination in the inaccessible" (Phoenix 2016). This certainly rings true in the case of *Mein Kampf*, so why does Germany keep the ban? According to Farin (2008), the Bavarian Government praised itself in the past for the appreciation it has received for its firm stance in this matter. This was when the most Southern federal state still opposed the idea of a critical edition – the Bavarian government only decided on supporting the endeavour in 2012 when the Institute for Contemporary History had already started working on it (*Spiegel Online* 2012). From the opportunistic reactions of the Bavarian government to international praise and criticism one could get the impression that the ban on reprinting the original text is being continued due to concerns about outside appearances based on the symbolic character of the book and not on the intention of protecting the public from the actual content.

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## Conclusion

Seven months after its first official reappearance in the German market it is obvious that *Mein Kampf* has not set the house on fire. That does not mean, however, that it is not burning. Far-right xenophobia is omnipresent. The refugee crisis has brought out the best in some and the worst in others. Whereas some people welcome refugees with open arms, others burn down refugee shelters and spread hate and fear on social media and in public. This is not the first time this has happened after the end of the Second World War. Germany experienced a similar situation in the 1990s during the war in the former Yugoslavia when Balkan refugees came to Germany. The events back then, especially the burning down of an accommodation for refugees and asylum seekers in Rostock, Eastern Germany, where neo-Nazis indulged in violence while being cheered on by members of the public, should have been a starting signal for the project 'critical edition'. Yes, outside appearances play a role and Germany has to tread carefully not to hurt sensibilities of victims of the Nazi regime but "[the] discourse of egalitarian social reform is secured by talk (dialogue), not by monologues of scholars, encyclopaedists, vanguards, and experts" (Jansen 1988, 6). In the case of *Mein Kampf* this would require giving the public access to the text. This has happened with the critical edition to a degree but it is only a first step. The review of the readership has shown that some people feel infantilised if they are not allowed to make up their own mind about Hitler's words, some feel the representations of facts has failed. But to secure an intelligent discourse about the book people will demand access to the original publication so they do not feel that only the powerful (in this case governmental agencies and academics) are allowed access to *Mein Kampf* whereas they are kept at distance. "The inoculation of a younger generation against the Nazi bacillus is better served by open confrontation with Hitler's words than by keeping his reviled tract in the shadows of illegality" (Range 2014). The Germany of today might be a different place if the critical edition had indeed been published years ago.

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