

## *The German Antitheses*

**The Life and Death of Adolf Hitler,**  
by Robert Payne, *New York: Praeger  
Publishers, Inc., 1973. 623 pp. \$12.95.*

FOR SEVERAL DAYS recently, I set up a routine for myself that I am sure no one else has ever thought of before. In the morning I sat down with a biography of Hitler; in the afternoon, when my patience was likely to be weaker, I turned to a biography of Johann Sebastian Bach. Crazy? Incredible? Not completely. I am a teacher of modern European history. So I read the biography of Hitler, a new one by Robert Payne, because I am supposed to know something about Hitler. I read the biography of Bach, the old one by Philipp Spitta, because I wanted to. It was my reward for doing my duty to Hitler. Of course, the life work of Bach is a splendor of European history. Unlike the great monuments in the world of the visual arts, it is a splendor that is still probably invulnerable to the worst excesses of human destructiveness. The domination in music—mostly posthumous—which Bach eventually gained was appropriate and inevitable. Especially in counterpoint he had a genius that looks today like the culmination of

centuries of development. His background in a family that had been musical for generations is known, and his background in the earlier music of Germany, Italy, and France also is known. These elements along with his own inspirations form a coherent whole. From the time he entered his first choir stall to the time of his deathbed contemplation of the hymn "Before thy throne I stand," Providence was working in history.

With Hitler all is different. Providence has let go of things. There is no greatness, only fleeting force and fury. Hitler promised a New Order. The various stages of his career along with his background actually form one of the most grotesquely hideous disorders of the modern era. There is no coherent whole, and the historian is left aghast not only at the carnage that turned out to be the result but also confused in the face of events that defy explanation. Where did Hitler come from ideologically? How did he come to power when he was hated by the Left and despised by the Right? How did he remain in power especially in the years of World War II, when it was evident that despite his will to expand Germany his policies were leading to her destruction? What is to be said of a Hitler who became so compulsively irrational towards the very end that he relished the idea that a Germany which had become unworthy of him was about to be destroyed altogether?

Of course in a sane Germany Hitler would never have become chancellor and for somewhat the same reasons that Abbie Hoffman has thus far not become president of the U.S.A. It is Payne's job to explain why Germany as well as Hitler was not sane. He gives considerable attention to Hitler's early years but does not thereby pretend to be able to trace Hitler's rabid racism and anti-Semitism. One almost has the feeling that a slightly different and accidental occurrence in those years might have shifted Hitler's hatefulness to entirely different purposes. But hateful Hitler certainly was, and prior to 1914 he was ex-

tremely maladjusted and unsuccessful in picking a vocation for himself. The world of art rejected his very plaintive application. Thereafter as second best he entered the world of politics where he triumphed so monstrously.

Payne is hardly adventurous in trying to explain this phenomenon. He follows many historians in laying great emphasis on the way in which Hitler capitalized on the distress which Germany suffered from the depression. Even more emphasis is laid on the way in which Hitler's broadcast demagoguery took hold of the emotions of the masses. Then, too, in a thoroughly vague and ill-defined fashion Payne mentions the support which Hitler gained from many German industrialists and the advantage he gained indirectly from the many intrigues that surrounded President Hindenburg in his last years in office. Perhaps to play along with still current tides of pseudo-Freudianism the author finally allows that Hitler's political career was a sublimation of repressed sexual desire. Fortunately there is little elaboration on this theme. Somewhat more attention is given to the equally dubious notion—slander against the illustrious dead is still quite legal—that the greatest influence in Hitler's life was Richard Wagner. In fact, the Third Reich was a succession of Wagnerian opera productions.

The twentieth century has been the most outrageous of centuries; within this century Adolf Hitler has been the most outrageous of personalities. Small then the surprise if biographers of Hitler feel drawn towards outrageous or at least implausible kinds of historical writing. In his work Payne occasionally tries as hard as most other students of Hitler to keep temptation under control. He is not always successful. In addition to the curious ideas mentioned just above, he has his share of other errors and distortions and confusions. Now and then he comes up with views which seem to burst through the bounds of available evidence. He asserts that Hitler actually ordered the *Putsch* against the Austrian government in 1934

and that in eventually humbling Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg in 1938, he Hitler was getting even with the kind of college professor that he had always hated. Then Payne asserts that Hitler—in many ways a provincialist—had sinister designs as far back as 1939 to conquer not just Europe but the world. Even more implausible is the author's conviction that Hitler's ultimately murderous nature may be traced back to the suicide of his niece and mistress Geli Raubal in the year 1931. Supposedly, Hitler, deeply aware of his own responsibility here, reacted by losing all feeling of moral restraint.

On the subject of the Jews, Hitler is portrayed, in line with many standard but still dubious interpretations, as looking mainly for a political scapegoat. Allegedly he began planning the "final solution" and destruction of the Jews from the very beginning of the war. In fact, though Hitler was an impresario of death on an unprecedented scale, it is not known in detail when and why he turned away from plans of persecution and expulsion to plans for extermination. Nor is it clear that he was kept posted on the detailed operations of the extermination programs as carried out in places such as Auschwitz. In turning to the military campaigns of World War II Payne again reveals debatable ideas. He says of the famous Dunkirk evacuation that it was made possible because Hitler with a love-hate complex about the English refused to allow his forces to close in for the kill, but later the author confuses things by noting that Hitler did not foresee the final success of the evacuation. He says too that at the time of the Franco-German armistice of 1940 the German *Führer* wanted the French army and fleet to join him as allies. In the next year's campaign against the Soviets the *Führer* is shown to be picking Leningrad rather than Moscow as the essential goal mainly because of his hatred of the very name Lenin. Needless to say, among serious students of the Nazi era these and other such ideas will not be helpful in forming a convincing picture of

Hitler. But on behalf of Payne and other biographers it has to be admitted that a convincing picture of Hitler is almost a contradiction in terms.

Reading any respectable biography of this man is going to be painful, but my way of handling the job worked out fairly well. For, with the morning's duty done, I could return to the pleasanter and nobler things of afternoon—to Spitta and his Bach.

Reviewed by BRENTON H. SMITH

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### *Old Lady Power*

**The Banishment**, by Alma Stone, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1973. 279 pp. \$6.95.

IN *The Banishment*, a short novel at once both sad and funny, Alma Stone dips into the future (how fantastic? how improbable?) to report on the banishment of all the old ladies from New York City by the decree of an all-powerful Committee, presided over by a Leader, and their subsequent overthrow of the city's regime and return not only to residence but also to power. The Committee, which has already dispensed with all the city parks and has poured concrete over all the grass and flowers too, finds, in the old ladies, perhaps the last threat to the hegemony of death, whether of conformity or uniformity, it has imposed on life in the city and decrees their registration and then banishment in a whole fleet of chartered "special" buses. But what have the old ladies actually *done*? On board one of the buses, one old lady speaks of the son who "turned her in" to the Committee's minions. "Puzzled, she sought an explanation from her seatmate. 'I was very quiet and meek. I tried not to be in the way. Why did he turn me in?"