

What to Do About Hitler?


The great thinkers of the past have tried to teach us how to behave in civilized and open societies. The English philosopher John Stuart Mill proclaimed that freedom of thought and expression are essential for both individuals and society as a whole. Anyone entering the main reading room of the New York Public Library reads the inscription over the door, "A good book is the precious lifeblood of a master spirit," a line from John Milton's *Aeropagitica* of 1644.

But even those who champion and defend the liberty to know, to utter, and argue freely according to conscience must be troubled by an imminent issue that arises at a time of increasing anti-Semitism in Europe and incessant terrorist attacks against the State of Israel. On January 1, 2016 the copyright of *Mein Kampf* by Adolf Hitler expires and anyone can print and distribute it.

This turgid 700-page book in two volumes was written by Hitler in 1925-26. He was serving a five-year prison term for high treason in the Bavarian fortress of Landsberg Am Lech for taking part in the failed Beer Hall putsch in Munich in November 1923. The book has sold millions of copies and from 1936 it was given as an official wedding present to newly-wed Germans during the Nazi regime, though few perhaps read it on their wedding night. More than 12 million copies were distributed during the Nazi regime.

Mein Kampf may haunt and be loathed by many people in the world, but it is respected or cherished by some. Hitler may have been an object of fun for Mel Brooks in *The Producers*, and a reanimated figure of satire for Timur Vermes in his book *Look Who's Back*. Nevertheless, an auction house in Los Angeles in February 2014 sold, after 11 bids, a set of volumes of *Mein Kampf* for \$64,850, and in March 2015 sold a first edition, signed by Hitler, for \$43,750.

After World War II, the Bavarian government claimed and held ownership of the copyright. The German government did not ban the book, but only its reprinting in Germany, and a number of countries did the same. However, pirated copies of the book were available and ordinary publication continued in many countries. Not surprisingly, it has long been published and distributed in Middle East Arab countries and by the Palestinian Authority. More surprisingly, India accounted for the sale of more than 100,000 copies, and it sells well in North Korea, and in Japan in a comic book version.

Mein Kampf was always available in public and university  libraries, and in recent years on the Internet. Since November 2012, digital editions have become best sellers on line, especially at Amazon, and on iTunes in Canada where a 99-cent version was the best seller.

The acute problem is whether the United States and other democratic countries should now, after the end of its copyright, ban publication of a book so full of hatred and bigotry and the forerunner of the Holocaust?

Banning books has continued throughout history, for religious, political, or sexual reasons, or because of their advocacy of violence. Among the thousands of works so banned are the Wycliff Bible in the 14th century, Machiavelli's *The Prince* in the 16th century, and works by Voltaire, Daniel Defoe, James Joyce, George Orwell, Vladimir Nabokov, Aldous Huxley, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Even Milton's own *Areopagitica* was held up for a while. The Catholic Index, until it was abolished by Pope Paul VI in 1966, contained many works, from Luther to Jean-Paul Sartre, considered anticlerical or heretical.

Will *Mein Kampf* have a new life 70 years after the death of its author? Though clumsily written, as George Orwell remarked, the message of Hitler was clear, it is full of hate, violence, rejection of civilized values, and contempt for

humanity. It is the basis of Nazi ideology. Hitler emphasized blood and the Aryan race as the determinant of human value, stressed the importance of the German *Volk*, and promoted strong nationalism.

Above all, the Jews were seen as the main enemy. They were the personification of the devil, the symbol of all evil. In sexually loaded allusion, Hitler pictured the black-haired Jewish youth, with satanic joy in his face, glaring at and spying on the unsuspecting girl whom he plans to seduce. In racist language, Jews will remain the eternal parasite, malignant bacteria. *Mein Kampf* announced his future intentions if he achieved power. The book was the basis for the creation of the totalitarian Nazi state and for the crimes of the Holocaust.

The choices for devotees of freedom and democratic values about the future of this work of hate against Jews and Western values, are stark. Should publication be allowed on the basis that democratic societies are based on open discussion and constant criticism? Should any official publication be banned or punished now that anti-hate laws are in existence, and that denial of the Holocaust is a punishable offence in number of western countries? Should any future publication be accompanied by a critical text pointing out both the preposterous nature of the work and its dire consequences?

This last option is in fact being planned in Munich where the book will be republished with annotations, commentaries, and criticism of Hitler and the Nazi regime. Apparently, German taxpayers will finance this publication.

John Milton argued the need to confront the enemy: "I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue." One must take a stand. Perhaps the least bad thing in this difficult and perplexing situation is not to forbid publication, but to ensure that, as much as possible, the royalties on the sales go to Jewish survivors of the Holocaust and families, or those

who suffered from Nazi horrors, or to Jewish charities.

First published in the