Hitler: 1889-1936 Hubris by Ian Kershaw

Excellent Biography

Noted for his excellent structural explanation of the Third Reichs political culture in The Hitler Myth, eminent historian Ian Kershaw shifts approach in this innovative biography of the Nazi tyrant. The first of a two-volume study, Hubris is far from a simple rehearsal of great man history, impressively exploring the historical forces that transformed a shiftless Austrian daydreamer into a dictator with immense power. In his forthright introduction, Kershaw acknowledges that, as a committed social historian, he did not include biography in his original intellectual plans. However, his growing preoccupation with the structures of Nazi domination pushed him toward questions about Hitlers place and considerable authority within that system. He argues that the sources for Hitlers power must be sought not only in the dictators actions but also (and more importantly) in the social circumstances of a nation that allowed him to overstep all institutional and moral barriers. In a comprehensive treatment of Hitlers life and times up through the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, Kershaw draws from documents recently made available from Russian archives and benefits from a rigorous source criticism that has discredited many records formerly understood to be reliable. Hubris thus supplants Alan Bullocks classic Hitler: A Study in Tyranny as the definitive account of a man who, with characteristic smugness, indicated that it was a divinely inspired history that made him: I go with the certainty of a sleep walker along a path laid out for me by Providence. Kershaws penetrating analysis of how such a certain path could emerge from the dire circumstances of post World War I Germany is the abiding strength of Hubris. --James Highfill

This superb book draws the reader closer to understanding this historically enigmatic and often bizarre human being who so changed the world of the 20th century. Although there are a myriad of such books that have appeared in the half-century since Hitlers demise in the dust and rubble of Berlin, this particular effort, which draws from hundreds of secondary sources, many of which have never before been cited, paints an authentic and masterful portrait of Hitler as an individual. This is an absolutely
singular historical work; and it will almost certainly displace other, older tomes as the standard text on the early life and rise of Adolph Hitler. Although I must confess that I intensely dislike reading through the early years of most biographies as depicted in so many other treatments of famous individuals, I loved reading this particular book. Kershaw takes a quite different and novel approach, and it is one I enjoyed. Here, by carefully locating and fixing the individual in the context and welter of his times, it yields a much more enlightening approach toward painting a meaningful comprehensive picture of how a neglected and conflicted boy meaningfully became such a terribly flawed and troubled man. Thus, we see the boy grow and change in whatever fashion into a man, tracing the rise of this troubled malcontent from the anonymity of Viennese shelters to a fiery and meteoric rise into politics, culminating in his ascent to rule Germany. Kershaw memorably recreates the social, economic, and political circumstances that bent and twisted Hitler so fatefully for the history of the world.

Hitler was, in Kershaws estimation, a man most representative of his times, reflecting a widespread disaffection with democratic politics, steeped in the virulent anti-Semitism of his Viennese environment, twisted and experienced in the cruelties and absurdities of the First World War, thrust by circumstance and disposition into the sectarian, dyspeptic, and rough & tumble politics of the 1920s, and rising by finding himself the most unlikely of politicians with an unusual ability to orate and emote. It is also interesting to discover that Hitler had an unusually acute (though uneven) intellect, is rumored to have possessed a photographic memory, and was said to have an amazing ability to discuss and quote facts and figures and then subsequently casually weave them into a conversation that witnesses found spellbinding and convincing. He was also unquestionably quite charismatic and charming.

From the beginning Kershaw argues it is impossible to understand `why Hitler without understanding this extremely toxic and strange combination of social, economic, and cultural factors that characterized Germany in the post-war era. Thus, by the time he begins his ineluctable rise to power, we much better understand both `how and `why such a seemingly unlikely cast of characters as the Nazis succeeded so wildly beyond what one would expect to be possible in a sane and sophisticated modern industrial state.

This is fascinating stuff, as is his treatment of the concomitant rise of the slugs, thugs, and under-life accompanying him into the corridors of power and influence. Here is the worlds greatest single collection of otherwise underachieving bullies, fanatics, pseudo-intellectuals, and fellow travelers, who clashed into an uneasy coalescence that formed the nucleus of the single greatest force for collective evil seen in the modern world. Ones mind reels at the scene at the books conclusion, as the newly formed Nazi power structure begins applying the progressively strangulating neck-lock on Germanys Jews, religious leaders, and other `malcontents. I await the publication of volume two of this effort with eager anticipation. Enjoy!