

Hitler: The Memoir of the Nazi Insider Who Turned Against the Fuhrer

Ernst Hanfstaengl, John Toland (Foreword)

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Of American and German parentage, Ernst Hanfstaengl graduated from Harvard and ran the family business in New York for a dozen years before returning to Germany in 1921. By chance he heard a then little-known Adolf Hitler speaking in a Munich beer hall and, mesmerized by his extraordinary oratorical power, was convinced the man would some day come to power. As Hitler's fanatical theories and ideas hardened, however, he surrounded himself with rabid extremists such as Goering, Hess, and Goebbels, and Hanfstaengl became estranged from him.

But with the Nazi's major unexpected political triumph in 1930, Hitler became a national figure, and he invited Hanfstaengl to be his foreign press secretary. It is from this unique insider's position that the author provides a vivid, intimate view of Hitler—with his neuroses, repressions, and growing megalomania—over the next several years. In 1937, four years after Hitler came to power, relations between Hanfstaengl and the Nazis had deteriorated to such a degree that he was forced to flee for his life, escaping to Switzerland. Here is a portrait of Hitler as you've rarely seen him.

Hitler: The Memoir of the Nazi Insider Who Turned Against the Fuhrer Details

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Jonathan Donihue says

An Unique Perspective

This book offers the unique perspective if one of Hitler's close companions during his rise to power. Being that it is a first person account, it has the advantage of offering the reader deeper insights into the life and times of the ascension of the Nazi regime. Unfortunately, it has the disadvantage of being filtered through the cultural and personal biases of the author. I get the impression that this book revealed to me much more about the character of Ernst Hanfstaengl than it did Hitler, the Nazi party, or early twentieth century Germany,

All in all, it was a worthwhile read. I would, however, think twice about accepting it as an accurate historical account.

Harold says

Good book! Had me interested all the way. If you have an interest in WWII read this one. You get a less formal look at the Nazi hierarchy, a glimpse at their personalities. Hanfstaengl, a man educated at Harvard, thought them an ignorant, loutish, treacherous lot, with no knowledge of the world outside of Germany, with the exception of Goering, who he dismissed as a "soldier of fortune" and in it for the personal gain. The blurb will give you the general outline of what occurred.

Mary Anne Mailliard says

Putzi speaks

Ernst Hanfstangel met Hitler in the early 1920's and was a close associate for many years. His view from the inside of Hitler's circle and his growing recognition of what can only be described as Hitler's megalomania makes for a great read.

Ellie Midwood says

Written by Hitler's former foreign press chief Ernst Hanfstaengl, this riveting memoir offers a glimpse into a psyche of Adolf Hitler, a man responsible for dragging half of the world into the most blood-shedding war in history. Part German, part American, Hanfstaengl never seemed to overcome this problem of self-identification: throughout the whole narration he appears to struggle between his devotion to both countries, which eventually led to his downfall in Hitler's hierarchy. The two men met each other when Hitler was still a nobody, a gifted, even though somewhat shabby public speaker working the sympathetic crowds in the beer halls of München. Initially attracted to Hitler's enigmatic persona, Hansftaengl soon becomes one of his closest friends and associates. Hanfstaengl introduces Hitler to the influential social circle in the hope to not

only restrain his manner but make him into someone more cultural, more open to new ideas, ready for the dialogue and compromise - in short, into someone whom Hitler would never become. As more and more radical characters start surrounding the unstable future chancellor, the more Hansfaengl tries to persuade himself that his presence is even more essential now as he's virtually the only person who can still sway the future dictator into a correct direction. But as Hitler officially becomes the leader of the state and purges began gaining force, the feebler Hanfstaengl's hopes become, until he finally realizes that from a close friend he became one of the "undesirables," someone who needs to be rid of as well. I've hardly ever come across such a detailed, intimate historical account. I'd definitely recommend this memoir for all serious history buffs.

Hester says

This book was ripped right out of the pages of an overly dramatic teenaged girl's diary, so I will present most of my review in the voice of said teen.

Dear diary, this year is going to be like the best year of school ever! I met this girl Aldophina in homeroom, she's kinda of poor and fat but she had this awesome folder with all the boys from One Direction on it, and the coolest thing was, it wasn't one of those massed produced folders either. She like made the One Direction collage on it herself, and of course Harry was the main focus. OMG I just ♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥ Harry too, he's too cute. Thank god he doesn't hang with that Taylor Swift slut anymore, I still can't believe he dated her. Anyway she offered to make one for me too. So excited to have found a new friend even if she's kinda poor and fat but I'm so much more open minded than my other friends so I'll hang with her too. Gotta run now, Heinrich is on his way to pick me up for our first official date. 7th Grade is so gonna be the best now that daddy has allowed me to date. Love Ernestine.

Dear diary, so Aldophina is really interesting, she is like an artist and can do funny voices and stuff, she can sound like Harry Styles which OMG is like the coolset. Gotta finish getting my room ready for the slumber party, tonight I officially introduce Adolphina to my other cool friends. I just know that me and my friends are gonna to be the coolest group in the school and will hang with only the cutest boys, we will own the school! Love Ernestine

Dear diary, sorry I haven't written in a while but I've been soooo busy helping Aldolphina run for 7th grade class president. I think this is the wrong move for her because she's not that smart and even though she's like this artist and can do funny voices and she's lost some weight she's still what mom calls slovenly, fancy word for messy (see how sophisticated I'm getting? Thats from mom allowing me to sit in her women's club meetings, cool I know) and she's not really that nice to ummm how should I say it? to the slow kids? I mean she's smarter than them but still she's not like me smart. Well, gotta run, Love Ernestine.

Dear diary, I'm so sad, like OMG like I think I need depression medication sad. Aldolphina won, which I mean like, yay!, but she doesn't really hang with me or talk to me that much anymore. Ever since she's won she's been hanging with these really mean girls and I mean MEAN girls like Greta Goering. They started this campaign against the slow kids, like they shouldn't be allowed in the same classes as us because they are a distraction and hold the smarter kids back with their stupidity. The worst is that she never listens to me anymore and whenever I come over to say hi to her and her clique of 7th grade officers they always shut up and freeze me out. I'm so thankful that I still have some really great friends but it's just so mean and wrong since I helped her become less of a loser. But she's still a big fat mean loser. Later, love Ernestine.

Dear diary, That's it, I officially hate that big mean fat pig Aldophina, she spread this lie around school that I

slept with Heinrich and that I give the 9th grade boys free handies behind the bleachers after school. At least my true friends are still behind me. I can't stop crying over what a fat lying bitch she turned out to be. Daddy is transferring me to another school as soon as he can. I can't attend VonWurstenberg High anymore with the daily harassment, oh god I just want to DIE, I'm so seriously thinking about killing myself. Sadly yours,
Ernestine.

That's the tone of this horrible horribly written book. It was so terrible I had to read this book in small doses and even then I still couldn't finish it. If Hanfstanengl was an insider, he wasn't that deeply in and he's a lie teller to some degree. How do I know this? He claims that he's the one who introduced Hitler to the Mitford sisters, well he didn't. Hitler had an already established friendship with Unity Mitford before the big victory rally at Nuremberg, bitch was still carrying a grudge that Unity was the one that almost got him killed by ratting him out.

This book offers no enlightenment whatsoever on the mind of one of the sickest monsters in history of the human race.

Karl Pence says

Valuable Insider View

This memoir provides a view inside the rise of the Nazi Party from its beginning to its achievement of total power. It is less of an apology than Speer's books. It also adds to my appreciation of Larson's *Beast in the Garden*. I found many passages reflective of how fragile a democratic political system can be. While there is a lot of self-serving here, there is also substantial general value (may I suggest reading the Afterword first, for context?).

Suzanne says

This is not particularly well written and I have the impression the author had a vaunted opinion of himself and his abilities, and his importance to Hitler, but it is interesting as an "insider view" of the Nazi rise to power. It is a fairly quick read. The author was apparently "upper class" and a monarchist and badly misjudged what the Nazis were (though he says they "changed" as their power increased). One has to wonder how long he would have "hung in there" in Hitler's "outer court" if he hadn't gotten wind of being on a Nazi hit list and run for his life. The Nazis were a cauldron of intrigue and backstabbing. But he spent a lot of time trying to "help" or "teach" or "steer" Hitler and his cronies, which was not only a thankless task but got him on their hit list. (He speaks a lot about Hitler's questionable sexuality and how that played a role but that is the least interesting and most suspect part of the book I think.) He was disillusioned and ended up thinking "treason" was the only way to help Germany.

I also couldn't help but think of today's Govt, in the guise of "those who don't know history repeat its mistakes" referring both to the Admin and the voters. For instance:

He wanted power, supreme and complete, and was convinced that if he talked often enough and aroused the masses sufficiently he must, in due course, be swept into office.

The author also said "the gift of all great demagogues [is] that of reducing complicated issues to fiery catch-phrases" but "Like most basically ignorant people, he had this complex about not needing to learn anything."

Among other insightful "transferable" quotes is: "abrupt reversal of policy is possible only under authoritarian regimes," which has to make one think of Executive Orders and explains why some in Congress think we now have an "imperial presidency" which should be reined in.

But my favorite quote may partly explain the 2016 "outsiders" election: "Every individual, whether rich or poor, has in his inner being a feeling of unfulfilment. Life is full of depressing disappointments, which people cannot master. Slumbering somewhere is the readiness to risk some final sacrifice, some adventure, in order to give a new shape to their lives. They will spend their last money on a lottery ticket."

I think it's worth reading for its quotable gems ("[I thought] there was every possibility of this poacher becoming a reliable gamekeeper") but also for some insight from someone who was there, and close, in Hitler's rise to power and descent into madness. And while I'm not one who equates Trump and Hitler, I do see some lessons for us today, on how to recognize authoritarians and demagogues BEFORE giving them absolute power, in how the Nazis rose and won and then destroyed themselves, their country, and nearly the world. Germans of all classes were fooled. Then it was too late. And if any Nazi had any desire to "do good" or "save their country" as opposed to simply becoming murderous dictators, those desires were totally corrupted by the power they managed to acquire. We all know the results.

This book is both an insider take on German history between the two world wars and some insight into that Germany and how it led to the Nazis and Hitler.

James (JD) Dittes says

Reading this book is worth three stars, but the story between the lines is what brings it up to four. The author was a Nazi, and for all time he will be remembered as one, even if he became a turncoat at the last possible minute. And because he was a Nazi, we will always distrust his account of events--and revel at the insights that distrust can bring.

Ernst Hanfstaengl embodies the arrogance and the myopia of German conservatives and monarchists who were instrumental in getting Hitler into power, yet he writes about himself as a good man who wanted only the best for his country. He loans Hitler money, introduces the future Fuehrer to his rich Munich friends, all the while looking down on this peasant-rube from Austria, all the while thinking that Hanfstaengl's piano-playing and art criticism and tales about America will alter Hitler's course and expand his mind, all the while thinking that he (Hanfstaengl) is pulling the strings and not Hitler...

...until it's too late. They all fell into Hitler's trap. Germany wasn't a nation of right-wing, racist crazies in 1923, the time when Hanfstaengl's and Hitler's lives intersect, but it was a nation of conservatives deeply frustrated by five years of rule by Socialists and action by Communist gangs. Like the Republican Party of 2013, the conservatives fueled the rise of the extremist parties with the goal of co-opting power before things got out of hand. Instead they were co-opted.

Hanfstaengl has some interesting insights. He alleges that Hitler's mania was in part due to his sexual impotence--Hanfstaengl doesn't relate the rumor that Hitler had lost a testicle in the war, but he maintains time and time again that Hitler was impotent--that his liaisons with a line of immature, blonde beauties led only to voyeurism and twisted acts. He inspects Hitler's bookshelves, both in Munich and in Vienna to get an idea of his intellectual background. Gossip aside, though, Hitler's intentions are opaque to him. At the last, he is trying to show Hitler as one who aspired to be Pericles. Wrong.

In the penultimate chapter, "The Last Chord," Hanfstaengl allows himself some honest reflection on the

Fuehrer. "When I talk to people," he quotes Hitler as saying, "I always talk as if the fate of the nation was bound up in their decision.... Certainly it means appealing to their vanity and ambition, but once I have got them to that point, the rest is easy." It certainly was in Hanfstaengl's case.

In another line of thought, Hanfstaengl writes, "Hitler was not so much a distiller as a bar-tender of genius. He took all the ingredients the German people offered him and mixed them through his private alchemy into a cocktail they wanted to drink." Again, this shows Hitler playing Germany's conservatives for all he was worth. By the time Hindenberg had passed away and he had gained dictatorial powers, he didn't rely on them at all, he ditched them utterly.

I put off reading this book because, as a person with intense interest in German history, I am quite "Hitlered out" when it comes to that man. But Hanfstaengl's Hitler is not WW2's mad genius. It is a look at the politician, beginning just a year before the Beer Hall Putsch through to the months prior to "the Polish crisis" as Hanfstaengl puts it (most of us call it the first action of the war). It is well worth the read.

Lewis Weinstein says

UPDATE 3/7/17 ...

I recently read the chapter about Putzi's incredible "escape" from Hitler's clutches during the Spanish Civil War in 1937. It's an exciting account, into which I introduced my fictional character Berthold Becker as my story moves along in the sequel to my recently published novel A Flood of Evil.

I always wonder if Putzi is totally honest, but this story, even allowing for exaggeration, is just too good to pass up.

Here's an excerpt in Putzi's words ... We can hardly have been in the air for ten minutes when Jaworsky came aft and said: "The pilot wants to talk to you." ... "Herr Hanfstaengl, I have no orders to take you to Salamanca. My instructions are to drop you over the Red lines between Barcelona and Madrid." ... "They were given me in a sealed envelope two minutes before I got into the plane. They are signed by Goering in person. There is nothing I can do. Orders are orders."

UPDATE 7/12/16 ...

I read the sections about Putzi's trip to America in 1934 to attend the 25th anniversary of his graduation from Harvard. His account is fascinating, although as always, is it totally true? My current plan is to use this trip in several scenes in Book 2 of A FLOOD OF EVIL.

"Putzi" Hanfstaengl, born in Munich, educated at Harvard, friend of FDR, spent the years from 1923 to 1934 in closed contact with Hitler and the other major Nazi figures. His memoirs are a series of fascinating, one-of-a-kind observations. I haven't finished the book - only read through the years next up for me in my novel-in-progress.

Here are a few of Putsi's observations ...

... Hitler was a man who thought everything could be accomplished by speeches and that underlings could be

left to look after the paper work.

... there were still years to go before Hitler became the unteachable, unreasonable and unapproachable fanatic whom the world knows from his days of power.

... I felt Hitler was a case of a man who was neither fish, flesh nor fowl, neither fully homosexual nor fully heterosexual. ... From watching Hitler and talking to those near him, I had formed the firm conviction that he was impotent, the repressed, masturbating type ... From the time I knew him, I do not suppose he had orthodox sexual relations with any woman.

... the telephone rang at my home and there was Rudolf Hess on the line: "Herr Hanfstaengl, the Führer is very anxious to talk to you. When would it be convenient for us to call on you?" ... In half an hour they were knocking at the door ... "Herr Hanfstaengl, I have come to ask you to take over the post of foreign press chief of the Party. You have all the connexions and could render us a great service." ... Munich was being flooded with foreign correspondents who had come down to interview this renascent phenomenon and he simply did not know how to deal with them or talk to them.

... (In Hitler's election campaigns of 1932) it was just like accompanying a musical artist on a concert tour ... We were reduced to the status of boxers' seconds, sponging him off between rounds, while he gasped for air and gathered his wits.

... "Herr Hitler," I said, "Mr. Churchill is in Munich and wants to meet you. This is a tremendous opportunity. They want me to bring you along to dinner at the Hotel Continental tonight." Hitler produced a thousand excuses, as he always did when he was afraid of meeting someone. [NOTE: They did not meet]

Quentin C. Haning says

Recollections

I was a high school boy while all this was going on, and in my immature naivety, understood little of the political activity that was behind the surface. At age 88, I can now look with some judgement as well as trepidation at the political intrigues that are presently affecting our nation and our world. I would recommend this book to people who were alive during WW 2, and to students of politics and/or history.

Ann says

Most nonfiction takes longer to read than fiction, at least for me. It was very interesting and insightful at times. It drag in spots however.

Cliff Ratner says

They should have listened to Putzi

The memoir of an insider and someone who was as close to a friend as Hitler had. His advise and warnings

to both Hitler and later the Allies could have changed history. Although some self aggrandizement is obvious, this is a great look at the part played by man who was a friend of both Hitler and Roosevelt.

Lilo says

Have you ever asked yourself how it was possible that a civilized nation like Germany, a nation of poets and thinkers (as Germany was called), could follow a megalomaniac, a madman, a monster, who rose to the infamous glory to become the worst mass murderer of the century, if not in all of history?

I had always thought that aside of the aftermath of WWI and the failure of the Weimar Republic, Hitler's rise had mainly been possible because of a multitude of very determined, power-craving and/or opportunistic henchmen, present in every society, AND, first and foremost, because of the so-called "stupid masses", who, unfortunately, are the majority in the population of every country. I still hold this opinion, but reading Ernst Hanfstaengl's book made me realize that I had missed a few things.

Harvard-educated, German-American Ernst Hanfstaengl was neither power-craving, nor was he opportunistic, and he definitely wasn't stupid. So what made him follow Hitler and become one of his closest allies in the early years of Hitler's rise to power?

The general question is: What could make an intelligent, educated, fairly decent man become a Nazi? And what could keep him from quitting his allegiance and distancing himself from the Nazi movement once he realized that Hitler had become a megalomaniac dictator and that the initial goals of the movement were being abandoned and replaced by insane anti-Semitism and preparations to push Germany into another war.

Why do people hold on to lost causes? Why does someone stay in a relationship that has gone sour? Why does someone stay in a social club that has become annoying? Why does someone stay in a political party that no longer pursues what it initially stood for?

My personal experience in all of the above mentioned cases is as follows:

(1) People are social animals. Once they feel at home in a certain relationship or group, they cling to it and won't easily let it go.

(2) Any engagement (be it political, religious, personal, or only a hobby) can easily become an obsession. Obsessions rarely get abandoned.

(3) Even when it is not an obsession, abandoning an engagement means admitting that one had made a mistake to get engaged with it in the first place. Most people have a problem with admitting that they had been wrong.

(4) There is always the hope, which quite often is an illusion, that one can influence another person or a group and lead it back onto the right track or, at least, exercise a restraining influence.

Any or even all of these reasons might explain why Hanfstaengl did not abandon ship at a time when it became clear that Hitler and his cronies were up to no good and things were going awry.

Hanfstaengl paid for his grave mistake. He barely escaped being assassinated on Hitler's orders when he had fallen out of grace for not being a yeah-sayer but being critical of Hitler's politics. And he ended up being interned for ten years by the Allies, under — at least part of the time — dreadful conditions.

Hanfstaengl's book is not merely a pleasant-to-read memoir, including gossip and some juicy stories, it is a **PRICELESS CONTEMPORARY HISTORICAL DOCUMENT**, providing a close-up picture of Hitler, from his paranoid little quirks to his private and public life to his demonic talent as an orator* and seducer of souls to his development as a ruthless, murderous, and monstrous dictator with no conscience and no compassion.

If you want to learn how a rather uneducated, weird character with an almost idiot-savant talent to attract, deceive, and manipulate people could rise to power, turn a democratic country into a police state, and lay the ground for the biggest world-wide catastrophe of the 20th century, **READ THIS BOOK**.

No matter how many books you have read about this era, **DO NOT MISS** this book. I consider it an absolute **MUST-READ**.

* Hanfstaengl concedes that Hitler's talent as an outstanding orator faded away in later years when he only screamed his tirades. (And this is how I remember the Hitler speeches from the radio [1941-1945], during which I always had to keep my mouth shut, while my annoyed family members listened with disgust.)

This review was written on December 25, 2013. It was edited on July 6, 2016 to add the following P.S.:

P.S. July 6, 2016: I listened to CNN's broadcast of Donald Trump's rally speech in Ohio today. It sounded exactly like the Hitler speeches as I remember them from the radio. Scary, isn't it?—Only difference: This time, I don't have to keep my mouth shut. (Not yet, anyway. Who knows what will happen after the elections? Or even before. Might there be a "Reichstagsbrand"?)

P.P.S. December 2, 2017: I wish the GOP would consider whether it is worth it to keep following a leader who no longer represents conservative (and even less American) values.

Chris Kuehl says

Another side of Hitler

A great view of Hitler from the inside. The running of Germany and all the men that controlled Hitler. Great read

Bruno says

What can I say? The guy is an inveterate name dropper that is way too impressed with his father's near royal Bavarian lineage and his mother's Civil War lineage. A totally self-absorbed Socialist who turned Nazi and then turned Socialist again and finally turned deserter to save his own ass. Interesting in parts but not an enjoyable read. Once is quite enough, thank you.
