

Stefan Aust

HITLER'S FIRST ENEMY

Rowohlt, non-fiction

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The story goes that Hitler would sometimes refuse to begin his speeches before the arrival of one of his harshest critics. That man's name was Konrad Heiden. As a reporter at the respected Frankfurter Zeitung, Heiden was one of the first journalists to follow and critically examine the Nazis' rise to power. His two-volume biography of Hitler, published in Switzerland in 1936/1937, informed virtually all subsequent descriptions of the dictator's life. And yet today, Heiden is all but forgotten. This is not only an insightful portrait of a fascinating man, but also vividly recreates Heiden's unique perspectives on Hitler's rise and rule. Heiden, a Social Democrat of Jewish ancestry, had already campaigned against the National Socialists as a student in Munich in the early 1920s. In a 1932 book published by Rowohlt, he described Nazism as "marching without a goal, staggering without being drunk, believing without God; not even its thirst for blood brings it any pleasure." Forced to flee Germany in March 1933, Heiden continued his struggle against the Nazis, putting his life in danger in the process. In the US he was seen as the preeminent expert on the regime and as its "Public Enemy No. 1." He died in New York in 1966. It is high time that we remember the life and work of one of Hitler's earliest adversaries.



Stefan Aust, born in 1946, is the publisher of the newspaper Die Welt and was chief executive of the TV news channel N24 and editor-in-chief at Der Spiegel for many years, as well as founder and chief executive of Spiegel TV. He has authored many books, including the international bestseller The Baader Meinhof Complex.

"Konrad Heiden was ahead of his time." *Deutschlandradio Kultur*

- **The impressive biography about Hitler's Public Enemy No. 1.**
- **English sample translation available.**
- **10,000 copies sold!**
- **The biography will be made into a film for German TV.**

Stefan Aust

Hitler's First Enemy.

The Battle of Konrad Heiden

English sample translation by Jefferson Chase

(table of contents, preface and chapter 11: p.140 -145)

Table of Contents

Preface: Return to Germany
Heiden and Hitler: Children of their Time
The Demise of the Wilhelmine Empire
A German Revolution
Spy and Reichswehr Propagandist
Witness to Events
Reporter
On the Sidelines of History
Prison as Political Fountain of Youth
A Young Man's Crisis
Hitler, The Actor
Loss of Journalistic Freedom
An Age of Irresponsibility
Heiden, The Author
In Exile
German Designs in the Saar Region
The Long Arm of the Gestapo
Kill Them, It's Allowed!
The Final Days of Freedom in the Saar Region
"A Most Revolting Screech"
Quarrel between Émigrés
Nighttime in Germany
Fleeing Hitler's War
"No One was More Endangered than Heiden"
Lost Homeland Europe
Known as Nazi Public Enemy No. 1
Hitler, An Endless Story
Breakthrough in the US
Post-War Bitterness
A Sickness of Great Men
Sources and Bibliography
Index of Names
Picture Credits

Preface

He was a journalist, and he only had one subject: Adolf Hitler.

Born in 1901, Konrad Heiden was a university student in Munich in the early 1920s when the failed painter from Braunau am Inn, who was twelve years his senior, began his fateful political career. The young Heiden recognized immediately that a dangerous movement was coalescing from the army of soldiers who had returned to Germany after being defeated in the Great War.

Heiden decided to become a reporter, a chronicler of events as they unfolded. He began as an assistant in the Munich office of the bourgeois-liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung* newspaper. Soon he was writing daily articles about the political chaos of the post-war period, in which Hitler was starting to sway masses of people.

Heiden acquired informers close to the would-be Führer and tried to find out how the system under Hitler's control functioned within the Nazi Party. He witnessed the earliest party events and described Hitler's effectiveness as a speaker with precision and an often bitterly sarcastic undertone. As a result, Heiden was accused of seeing "greatness in vulgarity" instead of expressing "loathing and outrage." Today we would say that the ever professional reporter Heiden coolly described what was going on in front of his eyes. Many of the details and dialogue he recorded sound unbelievably authentic. That was because he was able to take shorthand notes of what people said and discussed around him. No one reporter of the time was able to chronicle with such emotional distance and physical proximity the beginning of the disaster Hitler would unleash on Germany and the world.

Later Heiden would recall: "In the years in which he rose to prominence I listened to Hitler many dozens of times from quite nearby, and I was occasionally able to observe him in private circles from close proximity. But if I found anything emotionally fascinating back then, it was his audiences. I had formed a preconceived opinion of Hitler's speeches before I had ever heard one. Everything was nonsense, a pack of lies, and a dumb one at that, so utterly ridiculous that I thought everyone would have to see through them. On the contrary, his audiences were enthralled. Many of their faces were aglow with a kind of beatitude that had nothing to do with the content of Hitler's words, but instead reflected a profound sense of comfort felt by souls which had been shaken and upset. That didn't change my early rejection of Hitler. But to my dismay, I was beginning to learn something about human beings."

The early 1930s were difficult times for freelance journalists, so Heiden decided to turn his notes into a book. *Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus: Die Karriere einer Idee* (History of National Socialism: The Career of an Idea) was published in December 1932 by the Rowohlt publishing house and immediately banned when Hitler came to power the following January. Heiden was forced to flee Germany, going first to Switzerland and then the Saar region, then a protectorate of the League of Nations. There, he joined with other journalists to found the daily newspaper *Deutsche Freiheit* (German Freedom) and wrote a second book about Hitler's rise to power entitled *Die Geburt des Dritten Reiches* (The Birth of the Third Reich). In 1936, the Swiss publisher Europa Verlag published his biography of Hitler, the first ever written about the German dictator. It was quite successful and was translated into a number of languages. Today it is almost forgotten, although the literary agent Lars Schultze-Kossack purchased the Europa Verlag for the sole purpose of reissuing Heiden's landmark work in 2011.

My colleague Michael Kloft from Spiegel TV, with whom I've made a number of programs about the Third Reich, gave me an original edition from 1936 for my sixtieth birthday. One evening some time later, I discovered the book on my shelves and began reading it. I didn't put it down until the wee hours of the morning.

I had never read anything about Hitler's rise that was observed and described from such close proximity to the subject. I had the idea of making a film and writing a book. Who was this Konrad Heiden whose works laid the ground work for most of the later Hitler scholars? Joachim Fest, for example, credits him with writing the "first significant biography of Hitler." In his 1997 book *The Hitler of History*, American historian John Lukacs bemoans the fact that Heiden has been all but forgotten in Germany today. Lukacs points out that the young journalist, who incurred considerable risk in creating his account of his subject, recognized a number of things about history that most of his contemporaries either couldn't - or didn't want to.

From the very beginning, my book and film had the working title "Hitler's First Enemy." I only found out later that Elsbeth Weichmann, the wife of the long-time mayor of Hamburg, who met Heiden at the time in exile in Lisbon, described him as "the author of the courageous Hitler book from 1932, which made him into the Nazis' Public Enemy No. 1."

Like Weichmann and other opponents of the Nazis, Heiden was able to escape to the United States. In 1944, while in American exile, he wrote a new version of his Hitler book, entitled *The Führer*. It was a massive hit.

It was reviewed by no less than Thomas Mann in one of his regular BBC radio messages to the German people on February 28, 1944. "The world is ashamed," Mann said. "It's reading a book that has just appeared in Boston and has a guaranteed print-run of hundreds of thousands, having been taken up into the book of the Month Club. It's by Konrad Heiden, an émigré German author who wrote an instructive early history of National Socialism and now..., using newly available material, is presenting his depiction of the most abhorrent political adventurer in world history in life-size dimensions and with full clarity. It's a first-rate, lasting document that will help later historians and moralists understand the incomprehensible things that were possible in the second third of the twentieth century on this earth. The world is now reading this book in English, Spanish, French and German and finding a description and analysis of its own experience - and its cheeks are going red with shame."

Mann added that it was punishing and painful to review the history of this "murderous fool and cheap actor" and to read again how National Socialism - a "back-alley Islam" - had taken over Germany so as to carry out its crimes and turn the country into "an instrument of those boundless and idiotic crimes." Mann knew Heiden personally. In 1923, the journalist had invited him to hold a lecture in front of the "league of republican students" in Munich.

To read Heiden's first books in particular is to take a special journey back in time. Heiden had no way of knowing in the 1920s what would become of Hitler's movement. He described what he saw - and not what later historians knew about the course of history. That makes his observations, descriptions and analyses so fascinating - and prescient .

He foresaw Hitler's rise to power at a time when many people considered him a here-today-gone-tomorrow hate-monger.

He predicted the mass murder of Jews using poison gas before it had begun.

He viewed European unity as the only hope for the future of Germans and Europeans.

He was not a politician. He was a journalist.

His profession had an effect on what he wrote. Lukacs sees Heiden's "readable and crisp style" as an advantage. "At the same time, the work was a serious one," Lukacs wrote. "His account of Hitler's life and career (the book ended with June and July of 1934) was dense with details and often remarkably accurate." Lukacs praised Heiden's "insightful and personal commentaries about political figures and the political atmosphere of the time." Lukacs credits Heiden with seeing through the "legends and anecdotes" about Hitler, even if he did make some mistakes that historians later had to correct.

Heiden himself was very concerned with rectifying errors in later editions of his books. And his main thesis, in Lukacs' words, was "as valid now as it was more than sixty years ago: Hitler was underestimated, dangerously so, by his opponents as well as by his temporary allies."

For fifteen years after Heiden's work, and five after Hitler's suicide, despite flood of countless books about German and National Socialism in World War II, there were no serious studies or biographies of the German dictator. Those that came later profited immensely from Heiden, especially where Hitler's rise to power was concerned. Hitler biographer Joachim Fest, the author of 1973's *Hitler: Eine Karriere*, wrote that he felt indebted to Heiden in a variety of ways. His was the "earliest of historical efforts" and still worthy of emulation in "the boldness with which it posed questions and the freedom with which it rendered judgement."

Heiden was a controversial figure even among Hitler's opponents. The theater critic Alfred Kerr composed the following poem:

As one should before Schicklgruber
Mr. Heiden goes down on bended knee.
He calls this bloody blowhard
An epochal genius, quite touchingly
And thabnks to this sort of loyal praise
The German people get off scot-free.

As this book will show, Kerr's criticism was unfair. He seems to not to have understood that Heiden was hardly a Hitler admirer. The journalist remained a detractor even as he described in detail the fascination Hitler exercised on the masses. He wrote, sarcastically, that Hitler was "a demon albeit a great one."

There's no evidence that Kerr's poem was ever published. But writer Richard Friedenthal must have read it because on April 13, 1946, he wrote to Kerr: "As a side note to the question of the unconstrained und uninhibited utterance, do you really have to take such a heavy swing at Konrad Heiden, whose Hitler biography gave foreigners a first look at Hitler in a very uncertain world and made such an impression thanks to its tone of calm?...That's not just."

Heiden wrote very little about himself and next to nothing about the 1920s and '30s. Individual letters and notes have been preserved, several of which are in English and date from the early post-war years. It was difficult to reconstruct his life. That was a job for my colleague Charlotte Krüger, who, over the course of years collected everything Konrad Heiden intentionally or unintentionally left behind.

My thanks also go out to Reinhard Mohr who edited and shortened the original draft manuscript, which was much too long. Often I was so fascinated by Heiden's writing that this book threatened to exceed all sensible bounds. Nonetheless, the most significant and impressive passages of Heiden's writings, occasionally stretching over pages, have been retained. Above all, the purpose of this book is to show how a young reporter saw and described Hitler's rise at a time when he could guess but not know for sure the sort of inferno that Hitler's grab for power and world domination would ignite.

Heiden himself saw his life's mission with a certain modest pride. In the early 1960s, the sick and impoverished journalist, who was living in the US, applied for compensation from West Germany. He wrote: "Up until now I have ignored the personal insult the Nazis meted out on me. I was content with the knowledge that I repaid them in words and deeds as far as I could, although I wasn't motivated by desires for personal revenge."

Heiden regarded being excluded from his profession, driven from his homeland and stripped of his citizenship as part of the ups and down of a battle in which he himself occasionally landed some solid blows. He was buoyed by his conviction that he had only exercised his rights as a citizen. "I was satisfied that this belief put me in good company," Heiden wrote. "A number of excellent German people also made use of these rights in the same way, some early on, some unfortunately later, and many with absolute commitment."

This is also a book about journalism, about a reporter who wrote down what he saw, who never boasted about being an "investigative journalist," who was modest and who wanted to uncover the truth in words - no more and no less. Someone who had a perspective but didn't believe he had any specific mission to fulfill. Someone for whom his own opinion was less important than the story he told. Someone who was also part of history.

That's the story I want to tell - in my own words but above all in the words of Konrad Heiden.

The Actor Hitler (chapter 11, p.140 -145)

The satirical magazine *Simplicissimus* once ran a cover illustration depicting Hitler as a door-to-door salesman with an unhappy look on his face trying desperately to sell copies of *Mein Kampf* in pubs. A non-descript corpulent man holding a liter of beer snidely remarks over his shoulder: "Hey neighbor, that book's a bit expensive. Don't you have any matches?"

Konrad Heiden read Hitler's book, page for page, and he continued to follow closely how Hitler's movement was developing. Probably via Otto Strasser, he learned in detail that Strasser's brother Gregor was gradually building up a new party in northern Germany. Together with Otto, Gregor Strasser had cobbled together a bit of money and purchased a bankrupt right-wing newspaper publisher. Everywhere he was convening leadership conferences and founding so-called party regions, or *Gaue*.

"One of the fieriest fighters the new man has is his private secretary, young Dr. Paul Joseph Goebbels," Heiden later wrote. "The brothers are too independent and self-confident for a party that supposed to be subordinate to a single leader. They represent a 'national socialism' and not Nazism as a label for a one-man dictatorship disguised as a party."

The conflict openly broke out when Germany's socialist parties sought a public referendum aimed at ensuring that German aristocrats would not be returned the wealth confiscated from them in 1918. Otto Strasser issued a declaration of support for the referendum. "That didn't fit in with the Führer's plans," wrote Heiden. "It was time for him to strike." The Nazi Party, Hitler decreed, would help put down the "attack on private property." At a leadership conference in Bamberg in February 1926, Hitler put the Strasser brothers in their place, accusing them of lying about their intentions and excoriating their plan to make common cause with the Marxists as "infamous." A well-informed Heiden wrote: "Originally Goebbels wanted to vote with the Strassers against the aristocrats. Now he saw that in these circles the brothers were hopelessly outnumbered. He stood up and said that the Führer was completely right. With that, Hitler had vanquished his opposition within the party, and Goebbels had come over to Hitler's side."

That same year, Hitler named Goebbels the regional leader, *Gauleiter*, of Berlin. Within the party, the Strassers had been pushed to the margins. But as a source for Heiden they were more valuable than ever.

From another source placed deep within the party, Heiden must also have gotten a report about Hitler practicing for public appearances with his confidante Rudolf Hess. "He rehearsed his gestures and facial expression in front of the mirror," Heiden wrote. "Then he practiced something else. An important visitor had to be received. Hitler ran through the reception in advance with Hess." Hess was required to meet the visitor in advance. He was to inspect him closely and then report back to Hitler. The report went approximately like this.

Hitler: "Start telling me, Hess! Is he useful or useless?"

Hess: "Actually he's useful. But he doesn't say much."

Hitler (mistrustful): "Critical?"

Hess: "More uncertain. He'd like to be admiring, but he's a bit embarrassed."

Hitler: "They've all been prepared. They've listened to me for ten years, and for the past year, they've only listened to me. What does he expect?"

Hess: "Natural authority. Go ahead and talk for a long time. Your will is unbending. You determine the rules of time."

Hitler: "In a measured voice without yelling?"

Hess: "Of course."

At this point, according to the protocol of the conversation Heiden used, Hitler practiced a couple of sentences.

Hess listened like a human tuning fork. "No, not like that. Calmer. No with passion. In the tone of a command. You don't want anything from him. Destiny is talking..."

In the end, the advisor falls silent. Hitler is on a roll and talks with the same measured voice for several minutes: "I warn you against seeing us as a movement comparable to the rest of the parties. We are Germany's destiny and its future...by concentrating all our strength on what I see as revolutionary action, we collect all parts of the German people that still have the energy and ability to live..."

After six or seven minutes, Hitler breaks off, somewhat strained, and says: So I think we've got it now."

The dress rehearsal was followed by the big performance. Over the years Heiden had plenty of opportunities to observe how Hitler entered into a virtual trance at public appearances. "When the disheveled, almost hunched figure suddenly stiffens and unexpectedly flames up like an arch-angel, it's as though his hands and feet are shackled to the invisible hands and feet of a hero that pulls them," Heiden wrote. "His gaze moves into the distance, as though he were scanning or sighting something that no one else can see. Reports say that if an observer follows Hitler's gaze, he will see Rudolf Hess in a distant corner, his eyes fixed upon his Führer, seeming to recite something silently in advance, though his lips do not move."

Hitler's powers of suggestion, Heiden wrote, made the masses "see what they didn't see and not see what they did see." But what about the people directly around him, Heiden often asked himself. "Surely they must have heard this know-it-all, armed with the pseudo-knowledge of the day, constantly talking about things he didn't understand," wrote Heiden. "They must have noticed the impoverished German, the defective logic, the tasteless sense of fun and the fake pathos that he always displayed, whether it was over lunch or at a gathering."

So why did intellectuals subordinate themselves to the leadership of a hot-headed dervish? Heiden's answer: "He never let up. These people never stopped laughing at or getting upset because of him - and in between they were forced to grudgingly admire such an unprecedentedly successful political figure."

"What's most notable is the fervor with which he lied," an astonished Heiden repeatedly ascertained. "Whenever he could, he always followed up a lie with an oath or at least a word of honor." Those who worked with him were exasperated by Hitler's constant vacillations between whining and brutality - and even more so by his indecisiveness. Of course that didn't stop them from suppressing a grin and telling tall tales about the Führer's "superhuman determination" in their newspaper articles and speeches.

In particular after Ernst Röhm had left for Bolivia to work as a military adviser, there were rebellious subordinates in the SA. In the course of one quarrel, Hitler said that it would be better to have no National Socialist movement at all than one that lacked discipline and obedience. "Down to his very last fiber, he's a politician, a human being for whom everything is just a means to an end," Heiden analyzed. "The entire universe, from God on down to a mite, including all its hatred and love, all the people, animals and elements, are just raw materials for his power." In order to subjugate the skeptical, sarcastic SA once and for all and promote himself as the supreme leader, Hitler returned to the one man from his early days who still affectionately called him by the nickname "Ade."

He sent a telegram to La Paz, and by late 1930, Röhm was back in Germany. Hitler had to grant liberties, wrote Heiden, to "a colleague of such talent, ironic clarity of vision and nonetheless good will." Hitler must have seen how "with cold calculation Röhm confronted the SA with an idolized image of the Führer in which he himself obviously didn't believe." Heiden added: "That's how people throughout the ages thought when they got to know magic up close - or before it became magic." Heiden even cited Shakespeare: "Poor man! I know he would not be a wolf/But that he sees the Romans are but sheep/He were no lion, were Romans not hind."

For a short time in 1931, Joseph Goebbels spoke about Hitler as Cassius did about Caesar in Shakespeare. Together with a number of SA leaders, he complained about mentioning Röhm's "male harem" and didn't shy away from making his remarks in front of the Führer. In his hastily published diary, Goebbels called Hitler "the great man above us all" and a "star," but privately, as Heiden knew from a trustworthy source, Goebbels said he was tired of always having to take orders from this "operetta diva" in Munich.

But expanding his power secured his underlings' obedience, and Hitler was capable of learning. "Those who judge Hitler only on the basis of his foolish and half-baked statements and actions in the early days," wrote Heiden, "forget that power in and of itself is instructive and that only the stupidest mind fails to learn from acquiring responsibility and influence."

Nonetheless, in the Reichstag elections of 1928, the National Socialists only won 2.6 percent of the vote, giving them a paltry twelve deputies. It was to be the last regular election of the Weimar Republic. As of 1930, the Reichstag was continually being dissolved and new elections called. One emergency decree followed another. Mass unemployment, political hysteria and bitter ideological divisions greatly benefited the Nazis, whose influence upon society was relatively slight before the end of the 1920s.