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History

## Führer Fantasy

*Reviewed by Geoffrey Giles*  
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### THE HIDDEN HITLER

By Lothar Machtan

Translated From the German

By John Brownjohn

Basic. 434 pp. \$26

Who would argue with the picture of Adolf Hitler as perversity personified? In 1998, Robert Waite tried to convince us (in *Kaiser and Führer*) that the Nazi leader liked young women to squat over him and urinate on his head. Now Lothar Machtan from Bremen University suggestively alleges that what really turned Hitler on was sex with young men. He would have us believe that the future Führer had sex with the male friends of his youth, sex in the doss houses of Vienna and Munich, sex in the trenches of World War I, sex with his chauffeurs in the 1920s and regular naughty weekends in Weimar and Bayreuth. Not to mention nude frolics inside Landsberg prison and romantic liaisons with several of his closest lieutenants, such as Rudolf Hess!

In order to paint such a fanciful picture, Machtan has assiduously gathered every piece of malicious tittle-tattle and idle gossip that enemies and opponents of Hitler ever concocted. He compounds this with a heightened erotic spin on the memoir literature of Hitler's supporters. The veneer of serious scholarship that envelops this great mountain of dubious sources cannot obscure the hollowness inside. To be fair, the book is littered with caveats, but Machtan repeatedly brushes off any doubts that Adolf Hitler was indeed a homosexual.

Only his homosexuality, Machtan argues, could explain why Hitler remained a lance-corporal till the end of World War I. Either he refused promotion so that he could act out his homosexuality more freely with the young men in the ranks or his promotion was blocked due to charges of homosexuality. There is no proof of either scenario, but Machtan

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claims there can be no other explanation for someone who spent so long at the front. Yet there are a hundred reasons. My own grandfather, gassed in the trenches like Hitler, ended the war as a private, having permanently lost his British lance-corporal's stripe after being caught playing cards on sentry duty. But such mundane reasons stand no chance against Machtan's *idée fixe*.

Still not convinced? His fellow soldiers once smeared Hitler's genitals with boot polish while he was asleep, which must have been "a peculiarly coarse way of shaming homosexual comrades." I am afraid that Machtan must have led a very sheltered life, and was never in the army, or even the Boy Scouts, where such "blackballing" has long been common. These youthful high jinks carry no deep message about the victim's sexual orientation.

The very assumptions on which the American edition of the book is predicated are more forced than in the German original. In the latter, the author asks us to consider the evidence from two points of view: "particular, conspicuous features of the young Hitler's sexuality on the one hand, and on the other the well-known peculiarities of the homosocial milieu surrounding him as handed down to us in contemporary accounts." In the American version this sentence is replaced by an admonition "to interpret them with reference to the world of experience one might presume Hitler to have been living in at this period: the homosexual milieu. . . ."

This abrupt lurch from "homosocial" to "homosexual" is reflected also in the author's failure throughout the book to draw any meaningful dividing line between the homoerotic, which pervaded not only the Nazi movement but all para-military organizations, and the explicitly homosexual.

Machtan seeks to overturn decades of patient scholarship by proposing that Hitler ordered the murder of the homosexual Ernst Röhm less as a political ploy to win the support of the army than as a desperate reaction to the fear that Röhm knew too much about "Hitler's secret" (the title of the book in Germany) and might "out" him. The American edition is more outspoken about this than the German one. A cautious section heading in the original, "A Suggestion for Interpretation," has been removed here, clearly in order to make this shaky thesis sound less tentative.

Elsewhere spicy details have been added that are absent from the German original. A whole page has been inserted from the memoirs of August Kubizek (not Alfred, as Machtan has it in the bibliography), in which he describes a night spent together in an Alpine barn after a rainstorm, where he made Hitler strip naked and wrapped him up in a cloth to dry. This is, according to Machtan, the very "picture of a romantic love affair," though in the German edition he applies this phrase to the harmless peck on the cheek with which Hitler once greeted Kubizek at a Vienna railway station.

What if Hitler had been homosexual? Would it help us to understand the driving forces of Nazi Germany any better? While Machtan coyly denies this, claiming that he only wants to flesh out the human side of Hitler, he comes perilously close to blaming the entire Holocaust on Hitler's alleged homosexuality. He suggests that the testimonies by the Jews Maximilian Harden and Magnus Hirschfeld, in the campaign at the beginning of the century to unseat Kaiser Wilhelm II's homosexual adviser Philipp Eulenburg, made the young, emerging homosexual Hitler feel so angry and so threatened that this "may have provided the foundation -- for his subsequent conspiracy theory relating to 'international Jewry.' "

Although Machtan immediately softens this with one of his favorite phrases -- "we can only speculate whether" a direct connection exists with Hitler's "subsequent, lethal antisemitism" -- the idea has been planted and the damage done. This is precisely the insidious charge of certain extremist, fundamentalist groups in this country today: that the Holocaust was essentially perpetrated by a group of homosexuals, and therefore any toleration of homosexuals now will one day lead to a similar cataclysm. Despite Machtan's assurances that he is not crusading against homosexuals, he adopts several silly stereotypes. Hitler's friend Reinhold Hanisch worked as a manservant, which was "a positively classical form of homosexual occupation" (this outlandish statement is omitted from the German edition).

A love of Wagner's operas? Another giveaway! "Thanks not least to Thomas Mann's research we are familiar with the 'liberating effect' and 'safety valve function' that Wagner's music had, especially for homosexuals." Actually not even Machtan makes the claim that Wagner's music resonated especially for homosexuals, or that Thomas Mann conducted any such research. This is one of several examples of the translator John Brownjohn's misunderstanding of what the original German states. The text becomes most garbled when he does English translations of Machtan's German translation of an American scholar's English translation of something "Putzi" Hanfstaengl originally wrote in German. The poor reader cannot know how many nuances have been lost along this bumpy road. Even the "pink triangle," well known in this country for several decades as a symbol of gay persecution and gay pride, is mistranslated as a "pink chevron."

In one place alone in this hugely speculative book does Lothar Machtan write, "I shall leave better qualified scholars to answer those questions." In fact, most of the questions were confronted long ago. The consensus among historians is that, because Hitler had much evidence about his private life destroyed and because many statements about his sexuality stem from his opponents, there is little use in guessing. We can never know the answers conclusively. In any case there are many more significant questions.

One central issue that Machtan does not confront is the general harassment of homosexuals in Nazi Germany. If Hitler were indeed gay,

we might expect him to be protective of other homosexuals. Machtan claims in passing that he was not interested in the persecution of "ordinary" homosexuals, only those who knew his terrible secret. Yet that does not explain the extraordinary vindictiveness of the police measures initiated by Himmler in the mid-1930s. That could reflect the fact that Hitler was a kind of self-hating homosexual, but then one expect him to have ordered a much more sweeping campaign to round up all the several million homosexuals in Germany, and not just 100,000 or so, and to have instituted a real gay Holocaust. My own research suggests that Hitler did not have a personal stake in this issue, or policies would have been much clearer and more consistent. Instead the Nazi leadership was still searching for a definitive policy toward homosexuals right up to the end of the war, and indeed failed even to agree on a definition of what constituted a full-fledged homosexual. The result for those merely alleged to be homosexual could still be castration, incarceration or death. That is a more disturbing issue than Hitler's supposed recreational pursuits. •

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