

Internal Assessment

History



A comparison of three historians interpretations of Hitler and his actions during the Poland crisis of 1939

Introduction:

Historians focusing on Hitler's role in the Second World War are divided into two main groups; the intentionalists and the functionalists. The intentionalists believe that the actions and decisions taken by Hitler were all a part of him implementing the plan put forward in *Mein Kampf* already in the 20s. They also claim that the whole German empire depended on the existence of the Führer and that it was all a product of his will. The functionalists believe that Germany was run by a series of competing groups or individuals, and that this rivalry contributed to chaos of authorities. This chaos is explained by the intentionalists as being deliberately created by Hitler so that he himself could have the ultimate power over the most important issues. The intentionalists claim that Hitler was fulfilling his intentions. On the contrary the functionalists believe that he was acting in an opportunist way, desperately grasping the opportunities to secure his own position. The intentionalists are looking more closely at the foreign policies and the military mobilization, while the functionalists place their focus on domestic policies, economy and social problems.

In this essay I am focusing on the outbreak of war in 1939, and the two groups differ widely in the interpretation of this specific event. The intentionalists believe that the outbreak of war was planned by Hitler and it was only a part of his plan ultimately aiming at his two main objectives, namely *Lebensraum* in the east and the extermination of the Jews. The functionalists opposes the idea of the outbreak of war as a part of Hitler's plan. According to them was the war a necessity because of the prevailing circumstances. For example Germany was suffering from serious economic problem, and the war was seen as a solution to this problem¹.

The historians I have chosen for this task represents not only different times but they also belong to different groups. Bullock is clearly an intentionalist believing in Hitler following his original plan, while Fest and Kershaw are functionalists who believe that Hitler lacked a plan, and that he was somewhat of a gambler. Placing these three historians into these two groups is to some extent a simple generalization since they are not only following the ideas of 'their group' but developing their ideas in a personal manner which will result in some differences with the beliefs of the original groups.

¹ Johansson, Alf W, *Den Nazistiska utmaningen: Aspekter påandra världskriget*, Rabén Prisma, 1997, p 216 f

Purpose:

In this essay I have decided to compare the image of Hitler as a politician from a historiographical perspective. I have chosen three historians which I believe all represents different views and they are also written in different periods of time. The historians are Bullock (1950s), Fest (1970s) and Kershaw (1990s). They also represent the intentionalist and functionalist views as I mentioned earlier. Not to make the aspect too broad I am going to focus on the outbreak of war in 1939.

Method:

I choose four different aspects which I believe are relevant in showing the image of Hitler in these three biographies, namely:

- **The Poland Crisis:** How is Hitler described during the Poland crisis? What are his ambitions, does he have a clear goal or is he taking advantage of the opportunities which arise?
- **Specific sources and events:** What sources are used by the historians and which events are they stressing?
- **Dahlerus:** The interpretation by the different historians of Dahlerus attempts to mediate? How is Hitler's mood described?
- **Meeting at Berghof:** How is the meeting at Berghof with political and military leaders described?

The Poland Crisis

The main issue here is whether or not Hitler had a plan, a clear ambition, which he followed. The three historians differ in their description of Hitler's handling of the Polish question, Kershaw and Fest being of a quite similar opinion. According to Bullock Hitler had a clear goal which he was constantly striving to achieve, while Fest and Kershaw described him as being more of a gambler. Fest even called him Europe's greatest gambler. However Fest stresses his gradual 'escape' from reality, according to him Hitler began to despise and ignore reality. He created an almost inhuman image of himself: "He now began to see himself wrapped in the aura of the Leader free from weakness of human fallibility"².

Both Fest and Kershaw stresses the importance of the severe economic problems in leading towards war, which is typical of the functionalist view. Kershaw also brings up the declining living, working and housing conditions. He claims that Hitler believed that "only war and expansion could provide the answer to Germany's problems"³. Fest states that "economy was only one of the elements pushing the country towards war"⁴. Also Bullock admits that the economical situation called for rapid actions⁵

Fest claims that Hitler had two constant goals which were to create Lebensraum in the East and to destroy the humiliating Treaty of Versailles⁶. Hitler wrote in 'Mein Kampf' already in the 20s that "We shall...turn our eyes towards the lands of the East". Kershaw agrees in stating that Lebensraum in the East had been Hitler's goal for fifteen years, he also claims that this was the reason to why Hitler wanted to attack Poland, it was not a matter of regaining Danzig⁷. According to Bullock Hitler had a plan, which was clearly shown by him ordering an increase in the level of mobilization in 1938⁸.

By late March was the British-Polish mutual assistance treaty declared⁹. This made Hitler give up on Poland according to Kershaw. He was now determined that there had to be an

² Fest, Joachim, *Face of the Third Reich*, Weidenfeld & Nocolson, London, 1970, p. 45 f

³ Kershaw, Ian, *Hitler 1936 – 45: nemesis*, Allen Lane, London, 2000, p. 187

⁴ Fest, Joachim, 1970, p. 47

⁵ Bullock, Alan, *Hitler: en studie i tyranni*, Rabén Prisma, 1995, p. 472

⁶ Fest, Joachim, 1970, p. 48

⁷ Kershaw, Ian, 2000, p. 191

⁸ Bullock, Alan, 1995, p. 447 f

⁹ Bullock, Alan, 1995, p. 453

attack. Only the timing and conditions were to be determined¹⁰. Bullock states that the British-Polish treaty led to Hitler trying different ways to reach his goals. When he failed in getting a German-Polish alliance he tried to reach an understanding with the USSR. Thus, his actions were determined by his goal of Lebensraum, but he was sometimes forced to change his method to reach the goal. In the beginning of April Hitler declared his shift in policy towards Poland. He now set the date of the attack to 1 September¹¹. This is recorded by both Kershaw and Bullock.

Hitler's mood is differently described by the three historians. Bullock uses the example of Grégoir Grafencu who met Hitler in mid-April and got the impression that he was determined and calm about the Polish question. Henderson described Hitler as a chess player, who was watching his opponent waiting for him to make a fatal mistake which he could take advantage off¹². Kershaw, shows a totally different mood by using Burckhardt as a source. After his visit at the Eagle's Nest Burckhardt stated that Hitler had seemed nervous and even anxious. Kershaw also gives the example of Sir Alexander Cadogan, who after a meeting with Hitler claimed that he seemed "apparently undecided, rather distracted, rather aged"¹³. Fest gives the image of the Führer as an insane gambler being gradually removed from reality. At one occasion Göring tried to halt the insane behavior of Hitler and told him to "abandon his desperate gamble" on which Hitler answered that he had been gambling desperately his entire life¹⁴.

According to Fest Hitler began to overestimate his own abilities. He also underestimated his opponents, he refused to believe that they would take any risks. He once stated that "Our opponents are little worms"¹⁵. Also Kershaw states that Hitler overestimated himself¹⁶. On the contrary Bullock claims that even though there was a lot of pressure on Hitler he never lost his strong nerves or his ability to make excellent military calculations¹⁷.

¹⁰ Kershaw, p. 190

¹¹ Bullock, Alan, 1995, p. 449 f

¹² Bullock, Alan, 1995, p. 454 f

¹³ Kershaw, Ian, 2000, p. 202

¹⁴ Fest, Joachim, 1970, p. 50

¹⁵ Fest, Joachim, 1970, p. 50

¹⁶ Kershaw, Ian, 2000, p. 213

¹⁷ Bullock, Alan, 1995, p. 482

Only a few days before the set date of the attack on Poland General Halder wrote in his diary “The leader is very calm and clear”¹⁸. This was emphasized by Bullock. Only a few days later, after the attack on Poland Fest stresses that General Halder states “Hitler did not even have a general plan for war”. Fest describes the actions of Hitler as a result of his restless will to power. He describes Hitler as almost intoxicated and states that Hitler was incapable “to distinguish between possible and impossible”¹⁹. Kershaw writes that “Hitler decided. That much is clear”. According to Kershaw this was not positive, “the personalized decision-making...brought bewildering improvisation, rapid changes of course, uncertainty.” He describes Hitler’s actions as a result of his belief that war could solve any problem, war was inevitable for Hitler. He simply had no choice but to go for broke. Kershaw states that “The gambler has to think he will win”²⁰.

Specific Sources and Events

Kershaw and Bullock mainly uses the same sources, although to some extent they interpret them differently. The text written by Fest is more of an overview and he is not presenting specific sources or events in the same way as the other two. Both Bullock and Kershaw are discussing the Poles, but from two different perspectives. Bullock stresses that the Polish Foreign minister had no choice but to deny the German claims on Danzig and the Corridor, because of the strong public opinion on these specific points in Poland²¹. Bullock instead discusses the view of the German public. It was not difficult for Hitler to gain public support for an action against Poland. An exiled Social Democratic organization commented on the issue; “The mood of the people can be much more quickly whipped up against the Poles than against any other neighboring people”²².

The British government did not agree to the German claims in order to avoid war as they had done in September 1938. On 31 of March Chamberlain declared the British guarantee to Poland. This surprised Hitler and made him angry. Bullock also emphasizes that this sudden decision by Chamberlain was heavily criticized in Britain²³. Fest describes Chamberlain as dumbfounded when Hitler told him that he “didn’t care whether there was a war or not”.

¹⁸ Bullock, Alan, 1995, p. 483

¹⁹ Fest, Joachim, 1970, p. 53 f

²⁰ Kershaw, Ian, 2000, p. 227 f

²¹ Bullock, Alan, 1995, p. 449 f

²² Kershaw, Ian, 2000, p. 201

²³ Bullock, Alan, 1995, p. 452 f

Hitler complained about that Chamberlain destroyed his entry into Prague through his willingness to compromise²⁴. Both are critical of Chamberlain's decision although this is expressed by Bullock from the point of view of the public in Britain, while Kershaw emphasizes the reaction of Hitler.

According to Bullock was Ciano worried because of the German-Polish relations but Ribbentrop calmed him down, on which Ciano called Mussolini who was eager to reach an alliance with Germany. Ribbentrop believed that they would wait, but Hitler too was very eager. The 'Pact of Steel' was signed on 21 May²⁵. Kershaw on the other hand stresses a later meeting between Ribbentrop and Ciano, where Ribbentrop told Ciano that the "merciless destruction of Poland by Germany was inevitable". Ciano noted that there was nothing to do to prevent Germany from going to war²⁶. According to Bullock Ciano tried to convince Mussolini to break free from Germany in August, but the reactions from Mussolini were shifting²⁷. Thus, the role of Ribbentrop in his talks with Ciano, and the reactions of Ciano are differently described by the two historians.

Both Kershaw and Bullock discusses the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in detail. Bullock claims that it was Hitler who saw the opportunity of reaching an understanding with the USSR. Ribbentrop wanted a pact with the USSR but Hitler was cautious. Ribbentrop arranged a meeting but the instructions agreed on were declared invalid by Hitler. Hitler later decided he wanted to negotiate and after many hours at the negotiating table the pact was finally signed on the early morning of 24 August²⁸. The events are described somewhat differently by Kershaw. He too claims that Ribbentrop wanted the pact and that Hitler was hesitant. He says nothing which implies that it was Hitler who saw the opportunity arising. Hitler wanted to wait, but Ribbentrop put out feelers and got an encouraging response. This, he neglected to tell Hitler. Later he persuaded Hitler to allow negotiations, which led to the signing of the pact. Kershaw also describes how Hitler was waiting nervously at Berghof while Ribbentrop was negotiating with Molotov and Stalin, he reacted with relief and satisfaction when he got the result²⁹. The difference here is that Bullock present it as if it was Hitler who discovered

²⁴ Fest, Joachim, 1970, p. 49

²⁵ Bullock, Alan, 1995, p. 460 f

²⁶ Kershaw, Ian, 2000, p. 204

²⁷ Bullock, Alan, 1995, p. 480

²⁸ Bullock, Alan, 1995, p. 464 f

²⁹ Kershaw, Ian, 2000, p. 194 f

the opportunity, while this is not the case in Kershaw's text. Otherwise the descriptions of the treaty and the negotiations are quite similar.

Dahlerus

The Swedish industrialist Birger Dahlerus was one of Göring's personal friends³⁰. He is discussed by both Kershaw and Bullock, while he is not even mentioned by Fest. He is described in a similar way by both authors, but I believe he is important because he shows in a good way Hitler's mood. He is sent by Göring, but on Hitler's order, to London on the 25th of August with "vague offers of German good intent". In returning with a letter from Lord Halifax to Berlin he met Hitler who was in a "highly agitated state"³¹. In the meeting with Hitler Dahlerus got the impression of him being "completely abnormal"³². The same quote is given by both Bullock and Kershaw. One difference between how Dahlerus is presented by the two historians is that Bullock stresses his honesty in that he actually believed that he was sent to London in the purpose of preventing a war³³.

Hitler then listed some points which were taken to London by Dahlerus, most points were rejected by the British government. To Dahlerus surprise Hitler accepted the terms. Kershaw implies that Hitler's intention probably not were truly honest since while Dahlerus was sent once more to London to show the British government the 'generous' terms they were offering Poland, Hitler was preparing for war³⁴. After giving a speech to the Reichstag, Hitler met Dahlerus and Göring. Dahlerus thought that Hitler was truly nervous, he was screaming and became almost hysterical. Dahlerus considered it to be a highly awkward situation and according to him Göring also reacted to Hitler's strange behavior³⁵. Dahlerus' meetings with Hitler shows an image of him as an almost insane and hysterical person, this is the same in the two texts. However, Bullock is in most other parts emphasizing that Hitler was clear, calm and determined, which makes his presentation of Dahlerus even more interesting.

³⁰ Bullock, Alan, 1995, p. 477

³¹ Kershaw, Ian, 2000, p. 215 f

³² Kershaw, Ian, 2000, p. 216

³³ Bullock, Alan, 1995, p. 477

³⁴ Kershaw, Ian, 2000, p. 216 f

³⁵ Bullock, Alan, 1995, p. 495

Meeting at Berghof

Both Kershaw and Bullock describes Hitler's meeting with the most important military generals thoroughly, while it is only briefly mentioned by Fest. All generals in leading positions were summoned to the meeting at Berghof³⁶, all together there were 50 generals³⁷. The main differences between the two texts are how Hitler's mood and the reactions from the military leaders are described. Bullock describes Hitler as being in an extraordinary good mood. No discussion was allowed amongst the members of the audience, Hitler was talking and it was clear that they were only there to listen³⁸. Kershaw describes how Hitler was leaning on the piano as he was addressing the generals³⁹.

Both historians describes the content of the speech in a similar way. Hitler told the generals that he decided already in the spring that he was to attack Poland, then turn against the West and ultimately conquer lebensraum in the East⁴⁰. He stressed the importance of his own personality and skills; "Essentially all depends on me...". He also believed that the Western powers would not intervene in the conflict. General Liebmann has expressed that he usually thought Hitler's speeches were good but that this one "lacked all objectivity and was full of illusions". He believed that Hitler had lost all feelings of responsibility. General Liebmann also claims that many of the attending military leaders left with "grave faces or expressions of black humour" and he thought they felt in the same way as he did. Kershaw describes the mood as "largely fatalistic, resigned". These sentiments described by Kershaw are not even mentioned by Bullock. Another important difference between the two historians is that Kershaw also brings up the fact that Hitler after the meeting "had little confidence in and much contempt for his general"⁴¹. It is interesting that even though Kershaw and Bullock uses the exact same source – Hitler's speech – their interpretations differs so widely.

Fest describes the meeting very briefly and in his text there is only a short extract from Hitler's speech to his military leaders. However, Fest describes the social-darwinist

³⁶ Bullock, Alan, 1995, p. 471

³⁷ Kershaw, Ian, 2000, p. 207

³⁸ Bullock, Alan, 1995, p. 471 f

³⁹ Kershaw, Ian, 2000, p. 207

⁴⁰ Bullock, Alan, 1995, p. 472

⁴¹ Kershaw, Ian, 2000, p. 207 f

sentiments; “The strongest man is right. The greatest harshness”⁴². These sentiments are also described by Kershaw.

Conclusion:

There are apparent differences in how the three historians are describing Hitler’s role in the outbreak of war. Bullock stresses that Hitler had a clear ambition, and that he was calm and determined in the discussion concerning Poland. Kershaw describes the war as being a result of the difficulties in Germany, such as the severe economical problems. War was seen by Hitler as a solution to all of Germany’s difficulties. He also describes Hitler as a gambler, to some extent unaware of the real risks. Fest is of a similar opinion as that of Kershaw, he too stresses the economical problems as one factor leading the country towards war. Fest also uses the term ‘gambler’ to explain Hitler, he claims that Hitler was gambling desperately. Hitler is described as insane and on many occasions Fest describes him as intoxicated. According to Fest Hitler despised reality. There are many differences in the interpretations of these three historians, but they are also similar in some aspects. All three of them are discussing Lebensraum as Hitler’s clear goal, which he was working to achieve. You can also draw the conclusion that the role of Hitler was to some extent exaggerated right after the war, as Bullock wrote his book, and that as the world got some perspective and more information could be found and used the interpretation of Hitler changed.

[Word Count : 2977]

⁴² Fest, Joachim, 1970, p. 47

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