

# An attempt to rehabilitate Hitler

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The magazine the *European* has made Adolf Hitler the central theme of its latest edition. The Nazi leader's brightly colored face is displayed on the front page along with the headline: "Hitlertainment: Germany's Leading Pop Star." Inside, along with interviews with leading politicians and cultural figures, life style articles, and much that is trivial and tasteless, Ernst Nolte makes an insistent plea in defence of Hitler.

Under the headline "Break the Taboo," the 91-year-old historian complains that after Germany's defeat in World War II, Hitler was transformed "from a liberator to the 'absolute evil.'"

After the war, he writes, a "multitude of hate and condemnation" emerged, "which made the one-time 'liberator' a representative of 'absolute evil' and a 'taboo' who could not be spoken about seriously or scientifically." Nolte adds, "We are still hampered by this one-sided view today."

Elsewhere, he complains that there is not enough Hitler in contemporary German politics. Hitler, Nolte writes, could appear "as the forgotten representative of tendencies of 'self-assertion' that are missing in the official politics of the German government."

Nolte goes so far as to deny Hitler's responsibility for the Second World War. The war in 1939 was "provoked not primarily by Hitler, but by the refusal to make compromises on the part of Britain as well as Poland," he writes.

The "refusal to compromise" was Britain's and Poland's refusal to succumb to Hitler's blackmail by giving up Danzig and the Polish corridor and allying themselves with him against the Soviet Union.

Nolte also praises Hitler's birth policy, which he describes as a "pro-natal policy." The Nazis made a high priority of a policy based on German women delivering the Führer a large number of Aryan offspring. This was also the aim of the SS organisation "Lebensborn," which encouraged the pregnancy of single women because, as SS leader Himmler explained, "due to the fertility of the Russians," Germany would otherwise be "overrun by

them."

Nolte concludes that Hitler "combated the tendency towards the 'extinction of the people (Volkstod)' not without success through a pro-natal policy." With barely disguised racism, he charges that, by contrast, the "leadership of the German Federal Republic," in place of promoting German offspring, "tolerate and even encourage a policy of uncontrolled immigration."

In 1986, Ernst Nolte provoked the so-called "historians' dispute" (Historikerstreit) in Germany when he played down the crimes of the Nazis and justified Hitler's policies as an understandable response to Bolshevism. His right-wing views have become more radical since then. In 1998, he wrote in a book that Hitler had "well-founded reasons" to view the Jews as enemies "and adopt appropriate measures."

That Nolte now openly espouses views previously associated with neo-Nazi circles does not come as a surprise. What is remarkable, however, is that a supposedly serious magazine, not attached to the extreme right-wing spectrum, publishes such a contribution without comment, and this in turn provokes no opposition.

The *European* has been appearing online since 2009, and since 2012 it has been published four times per year in printed form. Its editor, Alexander Görlach, was previously department head at the political magazine *Cicero*. With a doctorate in theology and political science, he is well connected politically. He was deputy spokesman for the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union parliamentary fraction, and spokesman for the Association of Catholic Students. He has worked for several newspapers, radio stations and television broadcasters, and is a member of the Atlantik-Brücke think tank.

Alongside Nolte's piece, the latest edition of the *European* features interviews with German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble, veteran Social Democratic politician Egon Bahr, Christian Democratic Union politician Wolfgang Bosbach, the philosopher Rüdiger

Safranski, filmmaker Alexander Kluge, economist Thomas Piketty, and the general secretary of the German section of Amnesty International, Selmin Caliskan.

So far, however, none of these individuals seems concerned that his interview appears alongside a polemic calling for breaking the taboo on Hitler.

While Nolte's more moderate theses provoked strong opposition in 1986, today silence reigns. The only conclusion that can be reached is that ideas long considered extreme right-wing and unacceptable are once again part of the mainstream and viewed as a legitimate contribution to debate.

The *European*, which calls itself a magazine of debate, is not the first supposedly serious magazine to publicize Nolte. His rehabilitation began in 2000, when he was awarded the Konrad Adenauer prize by the Deutschland Foundation. Then, in February of this year, *Der Spiegel* opened its pages to him.

Already in *Der Spiegel*, in an interview with Dirk Kurbjuweit, Nolte claimed, without being challenged, that the Poles and the British were partly responsible for the Second World War because they had not joined sides with Hitler. Berlin-based historian Jörg Baberowski appeared in *Der Spiegel* as Nolte's advocate, declaring, "Nolte was done an injustice. He was historically correct."

How can these attempts to rehabilitate Hitler be explained? It is obviously not just a matter of isolated flukes. Although Nolte's contribution stands out for its open partisanship in favor of Hitler, the entire edition of the *European* is organized to give Nolte's opinions credibility.

The "debate magazine" is conducting a very strange debate. It is not about clarifying what really happened in the past and what lessons are to be drawn for the present. Questions that have occupied generations of serious historians are not touched upon, such as: Who was Hitler? Whose interests did he represent? Who helped him come to power? Why did the workers' movement fail? Terms such as Auschwitz, Gestapo, war of annihilation, and war crimes are absent.

Instead, Hitler has been transformed into a subjective cipher. The claim "whether we like it or not, Hitler is today a caricature of popular culture," runs like a thread from the magazine's first page to its last.

Editor Görlach declares "a de-demonisation is good for our approach to the Nazi period." There are pieces on "The Monster Next Door" and "The Hitler in Us." There are over seven pages of uncensored Nazi propaganda in the form of Hitler caricatures from the 1920s with the

original comments by Nazi media chief Ernst Hanfstaengl. Nolte's contribution fits perfectly into this eclectic mishmash.

The fact that the authors and producers of the magazine deal with Hitler in a thoroughly subjective way does not mean that they have no objective motives. The *European*'s second major topic is significant in this respect. It is presented under the heading: "The Just War. What would we Germans still kill for?"

The attempt to rehabilitate Hitler is inseparably bound up with the campaign to end Germany's military restraint, as propagated by German President Joachim Gauck, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and many other politicians and media representatives since the end of 2013.

History is returning with a vengeance. In 1961, Fritz Fischer in his book *Griff nach der Weltmacht (Bid for World Power)* exposed Germany's war aims in World War I and proved that the Nazis pursued the same goals in World War II. Today, Foreign Minister Steinmeier—particularly in Ukraine—is walking in the footsteps of his predecessors Bethmann Hollweg and von Ribbentrop. The global crisis of capitalism and the unraveling of the European Union are posing German imperialism with the same tasks it confronted in 1914 and 1939.

Numerous politicians, journalists and academics are attempting to justify the revival of German militarism ideologically. Jürgen Habermas, who led Nolte's opponents in the historians' dispute of the 1980s, has been supporting "humanitarian" military interventions since the war against Serbia in 1999. Green Party "anti-fascists" are cooperating with rightists in Kiev who honor Nazi collaborators in the Second World War. They feel the irresistible urge to rehabilitate Hitler. "We must, of course, humanise Hitler," writes the author Timur Vermes in the *European*.

Workers and young people should take this as a warning. Those who today call for lifting the taboo on Hitler will have no scruples about repeating his crimes, abroad and at home, tomorrow.



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