

Ernst Piper, *Alfred Rosenberg. Hitlers Chefideologe* (Munich: Karl Blessing Verlag, 2005), 831 pages, ISBN 3-89667-148-0.

For some time, it was an accepted fact amongst scholars of National Socialism that, unusually for one of the senior members of the Nazi leadership, Alfred Rosenberg had not been the subject of a comprehensive political biography and that this constituted a deficit in the historiography. Those works on Rosenberg which had appeared, though by no means insignificant, were invariably lacking in one important respect or another. Reinhard Bollmus' *Das Amt Rosenberg und seine Gegner*, which remains to this day a standard work, limits itself, however, largely to Rosenberg's activities in the field of culture and education.<sup>1</sup> Robert Cecil's 1972 biography, *The Myth of the Master Race: Alfred Rosenberg and Nazi Ideology*, as the title suggests, concentrates on Rosenberg's ideological influence on the Nazi movement.<sup>2</sup> In addition, being, as it is, over thirty years old, the book no longer reflects the state of existing scholarship. Fritz Nova's *Alfred Rosenberg: Nazi Theorist of the Holocaust* is more recent, but constitutes primarily an exploration of Rosenberg's ideological beliefs.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, it was with no little anticipation that this biographical study from Ernst Piper, who devoted twelve years to researching and writing the book (p. 650), was awaited. Unfortunately, Piper gets off to an inauspicious start. The first chapter following the introduction focuses, as is customary in a conventional biography, on Rosenberg's origins and youth. On less than nine and a half pages, the author summarizes the first twenty-five years – very nearly half – of Rosenberg's life. This in any biography, but particularly in one of this length, must be considered less than comprehensive. It is tempting to assume that the available source material was limited, but Piper makes no mention of anything which might have prevented a more in-depth analysis and the reader is merely left with the impression that the author was not particularly interested in Rosenberg's childhood or youth. In answering the question as to where Rosenberg's hatred came from, however, a closer examination of his youth is vital. His presence in Moscow at the time of the Russian Revolution, for example, at the age of twenty-four, must have been an important influence on the development of his ideology, of which his abhorrence of both Russia and Bolshevism were central and unwavering components. It is indeed credited by most commentators as having been of considerable significance and Piper himself deems it to be of sufficient importance to repeatedly refer to it throughout the course of the book (pp. 26, 49, 165, 198 and 522). Yet Piper neglects to supply a detailed portrayal either of Rosenberg's time in Moscow or of the city itself, in contrast to the generous space he affords Munich in the year 1919 (pp. 29-43).

With his subject's youth left behind, the author gets into gear. It is 'undeniable', as Piper demonstrates, that Rosenberg exerted substantial influence on the shaping of Hitler's 'conception of the world' during the early 1920s (p. 74). Bolshevism, foreign policy and the alleged striving of the Jewish people after world domination were all areas of particular interest and – supposedly – expertise on his part. In particular, the spread of the double epithet 'Jewish-Bolshevik' in Nazi propaganda is doubtless to be attributed to Rosenberg (pp. 165 and 427). 'Like all ideologues, he was convinced that a correct and, with it, successful political practice is not possible without a comprehensive theoretical basis' (p. 75). With this aim in mind, Rosenberg, 'a man of the written word' (p. 74), took up his pen again and again, and he was active in the years 1925 to 1933 above all as an author and an editor (p. 126). Indeed, he published more than all other leading National Socialists put together (p. 74).

What Piper succeeds particularly well in illustrating is the change in Rosenberg's fortunes subsequent to the re-founding of the NSDAP in early 1925 following Hitler's release from Landsberg prison and, even more pronounced, after the Nazi accession to power in

January 1933 and the reasons for this. The development from ideological movement to political party to government was one in which Rosenberg's influence declined steadily step by step. Political power was not sufficient for Rosenberg. He firmly believed that, with political power secured, the battle for the hearts and minds of the people could now begin in earnest. It was his conviction, after all, that a 'person only fights and dies for that which he really believes in' (p. 151). Thus, for Rosenberg, state power was only the first, though not the most important, aim (p. 199). This would explain his repeated failures and defeats in the Party internal power struggles of the post-1933 era.

Rosenberg was by no means left empty-handed in all respects after 1933, however. He was the clear victor, for example, in what rapidly developed into a competition to plunder the most, and the most valuable, art treasures from the occupied territories, even though his rivals included such powerful men as Hermann Göring and Heinrich Himmler (pp. 491-3, 495, 501-2, 508). Of those who had been prominent in the NSDAP in its infant years, he was in fact the only one other than Hitler who was still prominent twenty or more years later, but he was never again able to achieve that proximity to Hitler which he had enjoyed prior to the attempted putsch of November 1923 (p. 175). Rosenberg's appointment on 17 July 1941 to the post of Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories constituted without doubt the highpoint in his aspiring to personal power in the state. Piper devotes chapter ten of eleven to his subject's stint as 'East Minister' (pp. 509-611). Whilst he provides effective summaries on the ministry itself, those authorities nominally subordinated to it and their respective activities, Piper has not dug up much in the way of new material on either the activities of the East Ministry or the genocide against the Soviet Jews. This must be counted among the book's weaknesses. Elsewhere in the biography, some fundamental questions are left unanswered and even unaddressed by the author. These include when Rosenberg joined the Party and how it came about and when he first learnt about Hitler's intention to invade the Soviet Union.

Right to the bitter end, Rosenberg remained convinced of the righteousness of that which he had believed in for twenty-five years and more, and refused, even at Nuremberg, to renounce National Socialism itself (p. 633). He was certainly no opportunist, out for what he could get, for he was someone who really believed in that which he preached, despite its horrific and very evident consequences. As such he can accurately be described as 'a prisoner of dogmatism' (p. 382). According to Rosenberg, National Socialism had been abused; in theory at least, it was a positive thing (p. 625). Theory, indeed, was Rosenberg's specialist area. As 'Hitler's chief ideologist', 'for a quarter of a century he supplied the ideological basis for the unique crimes of the Hitler regime' (p. 633).

Despite the deficiencies of Ernst Piper's biography of Alfred Rosenberg, it is written in a smooth and absorbing style and, thanks in particular to the sheer wealth of information on show here, is bound to remain the standard on 'the man of the memoranda' (p. 560) for some time to come.

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1. Reinhard Bollmus, *Das Amt Rosenberg und seine Gegner. Zum Machtkampf im nationalsozialistischen Herrschaftssystem* (Stuttgart, 1970).
  2. Robert Cecil, *The Myth of the Master Race: Alfred Rosenberg and Nazi Ideology* (London, 1972).

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3. Fritz Nova, *Alfred Rosenberg: Nazi Theorist of the Holocaust* (New York, 1986).