

Robert Teigrob, *Four Days in Hitler's Germany: Mackenzie King's Mission to Avert a Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019). 292 pp. Cloth \$32.95.

In June 1937, as the deteriorating political situation in Europe drew the world closer to another world war, Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King travelled to Berlin to meet with Adolf Hitler and other high-ranking Nazi officials. Beyond brief acknowledgments of the visit by historians, this striking episode in the history of Canadian foreign policy has never been explored fully. With *Four Days in Hitler's Germany*, Robert Teigrob addresses this omission with an excellent account of King's journey to Berlin. While focused primarily on the activities of Prime Minister King, we also learn much about the transformation of Berlin's urban landscape in the postwar period. Well-illustrated with archival and contemporary photographs, the book provides readers with glimpses into German society in the 1930s, as witnessed by King.

Teigrob carefully contextualizes King's actions and opinions, avoiding the historicist trap. From our contemporary vantage point, King's encounters with Hitler and his other Nazi hosts are cringingly disturbing. Is it possible, however, that the Prime Minister's efforts at diplomatic conciliation and communication were useful and that King's own understanding of Nazi Germany was much improved by personal contact between the two leaders? Clearly, Teigrob's answer is no. From his experiences in Berlin, King developed a "spectacularly ill-informed image of Hitler and Nazism" (9). While other world leaders were duped by the German leader, Teigrob argues, "it would be difficult to find a democratic leader who missed the mark by a wider margin or held onto salutary views of the Fuhrer and his movement, in the face of outrage after outrage, more stubbornly or ingenuously" (10). "It is nigh impossible," the author suggests, "to find the good in King's initiative" (11). This damning portrait paints King as far too susceptible to the Nazi propaganda he was served and too uncritically impressed by the scenes he witnessed. In telling contrast, Colonel Harry Crerar, the Canadian Army director of military operations and intelligence, travelled to Berlin just weeks before King and arrived at quite divergent conclusions. The Prime Minister marveled at Germany's new autobahn, as he was whisked along in an open car driven by one of Hitler's closest associates; Crerar, by comparison, was greatly concerned by the newly built roads, recognizing their "strategical and tactical" importance (37). The two Canadians developed strikingly different perceptions based on their experiences in Germany. Ultimately, Colonel Crerar's assessment proved far more accurate.

The development of Canadian autonomy in foreign policy is an important

subtext of this study. King is the very archetype of cautiousness in Canadian political history. This strategy served him well; combined with keen political acumen, it explains King's exceptional time spent in government. The Prime Minister was especially vigilant in his conduct of international relations. He fought tirelessly against designs to formulate a concerted imperial policy, particularly at the 1937 Imperial Conference held right before his Berlin visit (53-4). After Canada achieved even greater independence through the Statute of Westminster in 1931, the prime minister proved most unwilling to pre-commit Canada to imperial plans. For similar reasons, King was critical of collective security through the League of Nations. Hitler, of course, was no fan of the League either, so the two leaders shared this in common (167). King far preferred conciliation and negotiation over military sanctions. For Hitler, the League was just another obstacle in his plans for expanding German *Lebensraum*. In discussions with Hitler and Hermann Göring, King was clear that Canadians would "come to Britain's defence if that country was imperiled by aggression" (146). Yet, he also felt it necessary to convey Canada's autonomy to the Germans by choosing not to stay with British Ambassador Nevile Henderson—a slight Henderson noted. Instead, while in Berlin, the prime minister chose a hotel adjacent to the British embassy. The symbolism is important. Historians have long debated the King government's foreign policy in the late 1930s. Unwillingness to provide clear assurances of support to the British in advance of 1939 and King's fervent advocacy of appeasement have been criticized. Teigrob's findings are relevant to this debate. King's first-hand experience in Berlin may well have contributed to his misjudgment of German aims, motivations, and war preparations.

While Canadians tout the importance of multiculturalism, *Four Days in Hitler's Germany* reminds us that this has not always been the case. Mackenzie King's antisemitism is on full display here. It is a damning indictment of not only a prime minister but also the people he represented. Fully attuned to political opinion, King knew well that most Canadians were either indifferent or hostile to the plight of European Jews. In his diary account of the Berlin visit, King addresses the Jewish question only on the fourth day when it was raised by German Foreign Minister Konstantin von Neurath, who told King that he would have "loathed living in Berlin with the Jews" (122). In fact, King even excuses Hitler's racism by suggesting his views on race had been "misrepresented," given that his aim was simply "to keep the blood of the people pure" (122). Though King was on friendly terms with Jewish individuals at home and abroad, such personal connections failed to undercut racism towards the Jewish community. Antisemitism was particularly entrenched in much of the Western world during King's time, but Teigrob pointedly identifies Canada as "the least welcoming Western nation for Jewish refugees fleeing Nazism" (118). Mackenzie King and Canadian society share the blame for this shameful distinction.

Four Days in Hitler's Germany is a truly compelling account of a Canadian Prime Minister's first-hand encounter with Nazism. Based heavily on Mackenzie

King's diary, it provides insight into the mindset of King, while conveying sufficient context for broader historical analysis. If only German records of this visit had survived, it would be equally compelling to know what Adolf Hitler and his Nazi associates thought of this Canadian in Berlin.

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