

Mein Kampf: **CENSORSHIP AND SENSIBILITY**

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In December 2015 the copyright of Adolf Hitler's contested *Mein Kampf* was released into the public domain, because the author had passed away more than 70 years ago. Until then, the rights to the book had been in the hands of the German federal state of Bavaria, which decided to forbid the publishing of the book. The Government of the Netherlands chose to do the same, adding a ban on the selling of the already existing publications, both the translations and the originals. Since the copyright expired, the question arose again: What to do with *Mein Kampf*?

The book

In 1923, Hitler tried to commit a coup with the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP). The coup failed, the party was forbidden, and Hitler was sentenced to five years' imprisonment. However, he was incarcerated for only 13 months. During this period, he wrote *Mein Kampf*, a book consisting of two parts, *Eine Abrechnung* (*A Reckoning* or in James Murphy's translation *A Retrospect*) published in 1925, and *Die national-sozialistische Bewegung* (*The National Socialist Movement*) published in 1926.¹ The book is a commentary on political events and developments of the period before the Second World War, and it proposes ideas about the alleged superiority of the German race as well as a vast amount of anti-Semitism. In the second part Hitler also explains the idea of a national socialistic party.² It is interesting to note that Hitler regretted writing the book after he became chancellor of Germany in 1933: He even said there was too much fantasy in it.³

The adaption

Mein Kampf was first published by Eher-Verlag, the publisher of the NSDAP. In the first few years 23,000 copies of the first volume and 13,000 of volume two were sold, but from 1930 onwards, this number increased further because of the rising influence of National Socialism.⁴ During Hitler's reign as chancellor of Germany from 1933 to 1945, the print runs were augmented because every newlywed German couple received a free copy, and all municipalities were obliged to buy the book.⁵ Although the title was forbidden after the war, by that time it had already sold over 10 million copies in Germany alone.⁶

Other countries were interested in *Mein Kampf* as well, but even at the time when the book was first published, the copyright was strictly enforced to make sure that the author would get his profits. France published an unauthorized copy in the 1930s to warn people against the ideas of Hitler. He filed a charge against this publication and it was forbidden when Germany occupied France in the Second World War.⁷ While the National Socialists were in power, the ideas of the party were deliberately exported to foreign countries, especially to the Middle East. The Nazis spread anti-Semitic ideas in the countries surrounding Palestine, so that they would align with them and help extinguish the Jewish population in Palestine and the neighbouring countries.⁸ Whether Germany used specifically *Mein Kampf* for this purpose is not clear. Fact remains that *Mein Kampf* has been a popular book in the Arabic world.⁹

After World War II reactions to *Mein Kampf* were rather different. Some countries banned the selling and publication of the book (e.g. the Netherlands), others resisted only the republication but not the selling (e.g. France), and others did not forbid the title at all (e.g. India). Sometimes countries only prohibited the publication after they had been criticized for their attitude regarding the book, as happened in Turkey.¹⁰ The countries that forbade the book were mostly on the Allied side during and after World War II (like the Netherlands). Many argued, however, that reading the book does not make someone a Nazi sympathizer, and that anti-Semitism would not necessarily decrease by banning the book.¹¹

Censorship

Prohibiting the publication of *Mein Kampf* is often referred to as censorship of the book, and there is a side that supports the choice of censorship, and one that does not. In explaining his position in this case, Stephen Hicks, a philosopher who examines political trends and wrote *Nietzsche and the Nazis* (2010), a book on National Socialism, accurately describes the main arguments of the two groups: 'Decent people can argue that the book is too dangerous to be published. But the fact is that *Mein Kampf* is too dangerous *not* to be published.'¹²

People that protest against the republication of *Mein Kampf* have several reasons for doing so. One is that the book contains ideas that are dangerous to humanity, such as the strong anti-Semitism.¹³ Another is that it shows no respect for the victims of the Second World War to publish Hitler's ideas again, and that it is in fact Nazi propaganda, and should therefore be banned.¹⁴

Opponents of the banning of *Mein Kampf* state that anyone wanting to have access to *Mein Kampf* can easily find it, both online and as a printed copy. Another argument they use is that it was not only Hitler who formulated the ideas of National Socialism and anti-Semitism, but that many people (including several intellectuals) agreed with him.¹⁵ Besides, censoring the book only increases its popularity, since there is an aura of mystery created around it.¹⁶

Since the copyright has already expired, there is not much the opponents of republication can do. The Bavarian State maintained the ban for 70 years, but this ended in January 2016 and since then a critical edition has been published.

A case study: *Mein Kampf* and the Netherlands

After the Second World War, the Dutch government claimed to have the copyright of the Dutch translation of *Mein Kampf*. By doing so, they prevented the publication of new Dutch editions. Likewise, what had been left of the Dutch edition published by George Kettmann was seized by the Dutch Government after the war.

Kettmann received the rights for the Dutch translation from the Eher-Verlag in 1938. He outsourced the translation to Steven Barends and published it in his own publishing house, De Amsterdamsche Keurkamer. Due to his

actions during the war, he was considered an enemy of the Netherlands, and all his possessions were seized by the State. He had been a passionate National Socialist, but not convincingly so according to Anton Mussert, the leader of the National Socialist Movement in the Netherlands, which made him join the German army to prove his loyalty. Because the publishing house belonged to Kettmann, upon seizing his possession, the Dutch Government thought that the copyright of the translation was theirs as well.

However, according to W.S. Huberts, a literary historian who researched National Socialist Dutch literature, this was not the case. Barends, the translator, gave up his translation rights after many fights with Kettmann, transferring them to his publishing house, De Amsterdamsche Keurkamer. However, since Kettmann was not the only owner of the business, it is not sure if the copyright and publishing house became the property of the Dutch Government as well.¹⁷

Whatever the case may be, the Dutch Government has maintained its ban on the Dutch translation until now. This even resulted in several lawsuits with people that had sold copies of the Dutch or German editions. Judges based their decisions on an earlier verdict from 1987 that Nazi propaganda may not be dispersed, but the accused were not always sentenced.¹⁸

The solution

As mentioned above, both the State of Bavaria and other countries that banned *Mein Kampf* will find it difficult to continue to do so since it is no longer subject to copyright. To prevent misunderstandings regarding the motives of new editions, the *Münchener Institut für Zeitgeschichte*¹⁹ came up with a solution: An academic edition of *Mein Kampf* that they have been working on for the past five years, which intends to demystify the ideas in the book. It has many annotations, arguing against what Hitler claims and providing his arguments with a historical context. The edition also shows what Hitler left out and how he came to his ideas.²⁰ When it was first announced, the State of Bavaria gave the permission for its publication. However, following criticism from Israel, their permission was

withdrawn. Objections were raised after the Bavarian Premier Horst Seehofer visited Israel. The main point of critique was the racism in Hitler's book. Furthermore, the Bavarian Ministry of Finance did not want to earn money by means of Hitler's ideas. The decision to withdraw permission was condemned by opposition parties and the scientific community and was seen as a limitation of academic freedom. Moreover, scholars claimed that most people are only interested in Hitler's ideas from a historical perspective and the State of Bavaria had already invested half a million euros in the project. As a result, permission for the edition was again granted and it was published in January 2016.²¹

After many years of trying to handle the content of *Mein Kampf* with sensitivity, this edition seems to be the solution to a delicate problem. It helps the world to understand the ideas of Hitler, to see what the polemics are, and to prevent the adoption of his thoughts without further knowledge of their dangers.

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The new edition of *Mein Kampf* was a great success. The first German print run of 5,000 books was sold before the books were in stores. A second print run

of 15,000 will ensure that the books can also be sold in stores. However, not all bookshops want the book. Again, people that sell the book value the historical aspect and demystification of its ideas, and people that do not sell the book value the complaints of the victims and their next of kin. The profit that is made from the book goes to a special fund to prevent individuals from making money out of Hitler's ideas. The book is not expected to gain too much attention from the general public, since it is quite expensive (59 euros) and heavy (containing a large amount of contextual information and non-colloquial language). As a German bookseller remarked in January 2016: 'Now there is much fuss about it. But in a few weeks' time, nobody will talk about it anymore.'

Notes.

- 1 Sprangers, Roy. 'Vrijlating van Adolf Hitler'. *Is Geschiedenis*. 20 December 2014. Web. 9 December 2015.
- 2 Murphy, James. 'Translator's Introduction'. *Mein Kampf*. Adolf Hitler. n.pl.: n.p., 1939. Web. 9 December 2015.
- 3 Ryback, Timothy W. *Hitler's Private Library: The Books that Shaped his Life*. London: Random House, 2010. Print. 92-93.
- 4 'Mein Kampf'. *Wikipedia* (Dutch). 22 August 2015. Web. 9 December 2015.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 'Mein Kampf'. *Wikipedia*. 9 December 2015. Web. 9 December 2015.
- 7 Zwaap, Rene. 'Mein Kampf over de grens'. *Nieuw Israëlitisch Weekblad*. 17 November 2014. Web. 9 December 2015.
- 8 Herf, Jeffrey. 'Nazi-propaganda voor de Arabische wereld'. *Duitsland Instituut*. 30 March 2015. Web. 9 December 2015.
- 9 Brabosh. 'Mein Kampf' erg populair bij moslims in 'Palestina' en het Midden-Oosten'. *De Vrienden van Israël*. 15 May 2010. Web. 9 December 2015.
- 10 Zwaap. 'Mein Kampf over de grens'.
- 11 Vleugel, Ferdinand. 'Heeft het verbod *Mein Kampf* zijn langste tijd gehad?'. *Nu.nl*. 21 November 2014. Web. 9 December 2015.
- 12 Hicks, Stephen. 'Is Republishing Hitler's *Mein Kampf* the Correct Decision?'. *Everjoe*. 12 March 2015. Web. 9 December 2015. n.pag.; 'Stephen Hicks'. *Wikipedia.com*. 21 April 2016. Web. 2 May 2016.
- 13 Marcus, B.K. 'Should Hitler's 'Mein Kampf' be published in Germany?'. *Newsweek*. 20 October 2015. Web. 9 December 2015.
- 14 Kulish, Nicholas. 'Rebuffing Scholars, Germany Vows to Keep Hitler Out of Print'. *New York Times*. 4 February 2010. Web. 9 December 2015.
- 15 Hicks. 'Is Republishing Hitler's *Mein Kampf* the Correct Decision?'
- 16 Maltby, Kate. 'Censoring *Mein Kampf* – or anything – simply makes its ugly ideas more attractive'. *Telegraph*. 4 July 2014. Web. 9 December 2015.
- 17 Huberts, Willem. 'Heruitgave van *Mein Kampf* is geen zaak voor de Nederlandse overheid'. *NRC Handelsblad*. 12 November 1997. Web. 9 December 2015.
- 18 Vleugel. 'Heeft het verbod *Mein Kampf* zijn langste tijd gehad?'
- 19 The Institute of Contemporary History is a research institute for German history from the 20th century to the present. One of its projects was to research the background of Hitler's thoughts and provide a critical edition of *Mein Kampf*.
- 20 Redactie Duitslandweb. 'Nieuwe Uitgave moet 'Mein Kampf' demystificeren'. *Duitsland Instituut*. 24 April 2012. Web. 9 December 2015.
- 21 Loomans, Simone. 'Kritische *Mein Kampf* mag toch'. *NOS*. 23 January 2014. Web. 9 December 2015.; Redactie Duitslandweb. 'Nieuwe Uitgave moet 'Mein Kampf' demystificeren'.
- 22 Leijendekker, Marc. 'Nieuwe *Mein Kampf* direct uitverkocht'. *NRC*. 11 January 2016. Web. 11 May 2016.