

World of Books



'The Life and Death Of Adolf Hitler'

William Hogan

THE MORAL to be learned from the life and death of Adolf Hitler? "A simple one: No man can be trusted with power. No man, once he has come to power, remains completely sane."

Robert Payne, a graying former Englishman in his 60s who has lived in this country since the immediate postwar era, is the author of several biographies, of Lenin, Stalin, Gandhi, Mao, a "portrait" of Andre Malraux. He talked about his new one here the other day, one that appears to be his most successful yet, "The Life and Death of Adolf Hitler" (Praeger; \$12.95).

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THE BOOK has no pretensions to sociological history; neither, as William L. Shirer's book did, does it detail the rise and fall of the Third Reich. This is a portrait of a man, a study in corruption and terror. Payne was impressed mostly with the "shabbiness" of the man Hitler; the classic liar, both as politician and soldier, who lied more than most and more successfully.

Yet he was also a surprisingly convincing actor, a master of mob psychology with a superior criminal intelligence. When one writes about the historical phenomenon of Hitler, even 27 years after his shabby marriage to the almost tragically loyal Eva Braun and their shabby deaths in a bunker under Berlin, one must stand

six feet away. Yet the fact of Hitler remains and a biographer must attempt to understand and interpret his subject.

Payne became fascinated by details of Hitler's early life which help to show how this supremely evil man was formed. He spent some 200 pages getting Hitler to the age of 21, where most other accounts of this life bring him to 21 around page 3.

The author is convinced that there are minor Hitlers in the world at all times. In an age when nihilism lies close to the surface, Hitler inevitably will find imitators and followers. Of course, Hitler's nihilism, followed to its logical conclusion, could lead only to "transforming the whole earth into a graveyard."

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"WHEN the chief executive is powerful enough to overwhelm the parliament," Payne writes in his final chapter; "when he rules by edict and executive order, when he attempts to exercise the rights that properly belong to the community, then he places himself in the position of Hitler."

Payne does not rule out the possibility of an American Hitler emerging at some future point. But that, in his judgment, would depend on a combination of three strong facts: massive unemployment, an economic crisis and a quasi-war situation.

Payne is already at work on a new biography, non-political. The subject, Leonardo da Vinci.