The Most Dangerous Book in the World?

The copyright of Mein Kampf just expired, allowing Adolf Hitler's hate-filled manifesto to be published in Germany for the first time in 70 years. Is that a good thing?  

It's perhaps the world's most despised book—a mishmash of ideological manifesto, autobiography, and crackpot delusions by one of history's most notorious mass murderers, Adolf Hitler.

Mein Kampf, German for "my struggle," was written by Hitler when he was in his mid-30s and serving jail time for high treason against Germany. The book helped popularize his ideas about expanding Germany far beyond its borders as well as his vitriolic anti-Semitic views, which foreshadowed his campaign some 15 years later to exterminate the Jewish people (see Timeline, p. 20). Publishing the book in Germany has been illegal for 70 years because Bavaria, a German state that assumed the copyright after Hitler's death in 1945, feared
A critical edition of Mein Kampf on display at a bookstore in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, in January—the first time in 70 years that the book has been published in that country

it might inspire others to adopt Hitler’s hateful ideas. But that copyright expired on Dec. 31, 2015, allowing any publisher in Germany and those in many other countries to reprint the full work, with or without proper historical context. That’s concerning to some people.

“The fact that the book is readily available gives it a certain credibility and legitimacy and makes it acceptable to have the book lying around on your living room table and saying, ‘This is what I believe,’” says Menachem Rosensaft, a son of Holocaust survivors who teaches courses on genocide law at the law schools of Columbia University and Cornell University in New York. “It serves to make Hitler acceptable in polite society.”

‘People of the Same Blood’
The Austrian-born Hitler, a failed painter but mesmerizing speaker, was a radical figure on the fringes of German politics when he completed the two volumes of Mein Kampf in 1925 and 1926. He wrote most of it in a Bavarian prison, where he was serving time for leading fellow nationalists in what’s known as the Munich Beer Hall Putsch, an attempted coup against the state government. He aspired to seize power throughout Germany, and in 1933 he succeeded in becoming Germany’s chancellor, though not through a coup: German President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Hitler to the post in hopes of gaining the support of his Nazi Party.

Hitler opens the book with a wish that he was to realize as Germany’s dictator—the reunification of German-speaking Austria with Germany into a “great German Motherland.”

“People of the same blood should be in the same Reich [empire],” he asserts. He also argued that Germans needed enough land to flourish, an expansionist vision that would lead to World War II (1939-45), with the German invasion of Poland in 1939 and later conquests of most of Europe, including a large swath of the Soviet Union.

Hitler’s manifesto also hinted at another infernal plan. Though Jews constituted less than 1 percent of the German population, Hitler blamed them for Germany’s loss in the First World War (1914-18) and its depressed economy. He wrote of his desire to foster a pure “master race” of “Aryans”—a misuse of an anthropological term for a category of whites. He wanted Aryans to be uncorrupted by Jews or other “inferior” groups like the Roma (known at the time as Gypsies) and the disabled. Had Jewish “corrupters of the nation… been subjected to poison gas,” he wrote, the deaths of millions of Germans in the First World War wouldn’t have been in vain.

Those early ideas from a paranoid sociopath led, once Hitler became Germany’s dictator, to laws that barred Jews from public schools, professions, even park benches. They also led to violent pogroms like Kristallnacht in November 1938 and ultimately the Holocaust. The 6 million Jews killed...
10 Million Copies Sold

Mauthausen didn't achieve popularity or book sales until after the war, when the Allies banned the Nazi Party from publishing. After the fall of Berlin, the Nazis were forced to sell the book in an underground market. The U.S. government, however, did not ban the book, and it was sold in the United States and in German-language editions in Europe. The book was also sold in English, French, and other languages.

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1941
Mass Murder
Concentration camps fill with thousands as the mass murder of Jews, the Roma, Communists, the disabled, and other "undesirables" begins. In June, Germany invades the Soviet Union.

1942-43
'The Final Solution'
The Nazis formalize their plan, known as The Final Solution, to kill all of Europe's Jews. By the end of the war in 1945, the Nazis have murdered 6 million Jews.

Spring 1945
Germany Surrenders
The tide of the war turns against Germany. On April 30, Hitler commits suicide in a Berlin bunker as U.S. and Soviet troops close in. Seven days later, Germany surrenders.

Fall 1945
Nuremberg Trials
During trials in Germany for war crimes, dozens of Nazis are sentenced to death, but others flee to safety. It's the first time an international court tries leaders for crimes committed during war.

Hitler in Context
Anticipating the copyright expiration, a team of scholars and historians under the direction of the Institute of Contemporary History in Munich spent three years preparing a two-volume edition that contains 3,500 critical annotations and columns of commentary that put Hitler's statements in context or demonstrate how wrong-headed many were. The introduction describes Hitler's writings as "half-baked, incoherent and difficult to read." Kraus thinks the annotated edition should be included in Germany's high school curriculum.

That edition's first printing of 4,000 copies sold out within hours after it went on sale on January 8 for 59 euros (about $64) a copy. And there's renewed interest in the book in the U.S. too, which concerns Rosensalt, the son of Holocaust survivors who teaches courses on genocide law. At a time when we're seeing increasing incidences of anti-Semitism in Europe and the resurgence of far-right parties, some of whom have adopted Nazi symbols, "anything that serves to embolden that form of bigotry is troubling," he says.

Yet Germany has for decades required its young people to educate themselves about the evils of the Nazi era, and some argue that an annotated edition may help illuminate that shameful chapter.

Historian Marwell and others think that an intelligently presented version of Mein Kampf is the right approach for American readers too.

"Barring access to such material," says Marwell, "only makes it more attractive."