

Amazon Nights

While English writing from Evelyn Waugh to Spike Milligan has produced some comic masterpieces associated with the Second World War, the fate of Nazi Germany is not an obvious topic for humour, perhaps least of all in German literature. *The Night of the Amazons* by Herbert Rosendorfer, where the general tragedy is continually reduced to individual farce, may therefore come as a pleasant surprise, and Rosendorfer, who has a legal background and intimate knowledge of the Munich area, certainly provides a valuable alternative and at times minutely documented perspective on this period in German history. We are given an intimate glimpse behind the scenes, a chance to view some of the famous and infamous moments in the history of Nazi Germany from a new, refreshingly different, indeed darkly humorous angle. Comedy is not used here to trivialise, but rather to sharpen our critical focus.

In the novel, first published in 1989,¹ Hitler's career, from his murky beginnings as a suspect, shabby figure in and around post First World War Munich to his and Germany's cataclysmic fall in 1945, are viewed largely through the rise and fall of one Christian Weber. Hailing from comically obscure origins, Weber is enthusiastically involved in the Nazi movement from the very outset, and is the stereotypical embodiment of all that was worst in Germany, and more specifically in Bavaria, at the time.

So what was he like, this Christian Weber? Brutal, opinionated intellectually limited, violently prejudiced, anti-Semitic. Uncouth and coarse, a man of revolting habits – including unpleasant sexual propensities - a plebeian in the worst sense of the word. Corpulent, gluttonous and grasping. A habitu  of the beer-hall and the brothel.

¹ An English translation by Ian Mitchell was published by Secker and Warburg in 1991, a paperback version by Minerva in 1992, but sadly both are currently out of print.

Always ready, indeed ever willing, to use his fists – or his not inconsiderable paunch – to intimidate political opponents. In October 1921, he is implicated in the shooting and wounding of a Munich Social-Democrat member of the state parliament, but even at this stage the police and the judiciary have a sufficiently right-wing bias for activists like Weber on occasion literally to get away with murder. Like many another in the dangerously anarchic times after the First World War he frequently goes about armed.

Above all our “hero” is self-seeking. The establishment of an extreme and totalitarian regime is for him not a matter of ideology. Hitler’s political credo *Mein Kampf* is for Weber just so much waste paper and wasted effort. For Goebbels, Göring (whom Weber in fact more than a little resembles), and the rest he has nothing but contempt. Later he will, like Göring and for similar reasons, fail to appreciate Hitler’s inexorable drive for war: why fight a war when we’re in control and having such a whale of a time now?! Why take risks when the good life is assured? Weber lacks his Führer’s ascetic fanaticism. He simply and unashamedly sees Nazism as a golden opportunity to feather his own nest.

Firstly we are treated to some delicious details – or are they merely scurrilous, fictional speculations? – about Hitler’s first rather faltering steps on the road to national domination, and beyond.

Picture a seedy bar in downtown, post-war Munich, 10.30 on a rainy Monday evening. A one-armed veteran of the First World War has something to sell, so he tries the only other customer, a regular known at this stage only as the “Brüller” - “the screamer” or the “ranter”, we might translate. It is an Iron Cross and crucially - this is what raises the asking price from a few *pfennig* to a not inconsiderable five marks - its accompanying certificate does not have the recipient’s name filled in. So whoever owns medal and certificate could, as it were, award himself the Iron Cross. The anonymous “ranter” pays and soon afterwards is thrown out for not settling his bar-bill (18 beers, 4 roast pork - one with dumpling - and 26 cherry cakes with whipped cream). The bouncer called in to eject

him, and who has witnessed the dubious deal with the war veteran, is one Christian Weber. Hitler, about whose bravery in the trenches great play was made, is said to have had a very sweet tooth...

And now to the Munich *putsch*.² On the morning after Hitler's operatic beer-hall "takeover" of power, Weber, back at home in his flat and fairly hung-over after the proceedings of the night before, takes his time. He orders a fellow brown-shirt³ to take two billion Marks⁴ from the drawer to go and buy breakfast, first ensuring that he will be able to indulge in his absolute favourite: sausages with jam. Not for the last time he is in instinctive disagreement with the strategy of his friend Adolf, who has now taken to calling himself Wolf, to fit in with his smart new friends. "To-day is not the day to have a revolution," he grumbles: revolutions are best carried out in the summer, with warm weather and the beer-gardens full. He claims to have had a real altercation with Hitler on the previous evening, but he wouldn't listen: a shot into the ceiling of the *Bürgerbräu* beer-cellar, a few old ladies in fur coats fainting with excitement and the idiot thinks he's *Reichskanzler* already. And that awful Prussian Göring has given overall control over transport facilities to someone other than Weber, who already regards transport as his patch.

Be that all as it may, the *putsch* is on. Weber orders his personal little band of half a dozen activists not to wear SA uniform – a Nazi armband will be much more convenient, for who knows how things will turn out? Why take risks? And he has some ideas of his own up his sleeve... There is tension and uncertainty on the streets. Who is actually in control now, in what is anyway an anarchic, volatile situation? The police and the army are, for the time being, remaining neutral. As soon as the group are challenged by a policeman, Weber has his men remove their armbands: they are merely private, law-

² The failed attempt at an armed take-over of the Bavarian state by Hitler's Nazis in November 1923.

³ Uniform of Hitler's paramilitary groups, the SA.

⁴ The effects of hyper-inflation were all too obvious at the time.

abiding citizens off for an early-morning drink. Will Hitler march? At present he is, as so often, temporising. In any case, if there is a march, thinks the policeman, they won't get far. Eventually they make it through to outside the beer cellar, now the temporary Nazi HQ. Lorries and machine-guns are being readied, a brass band plays out of tune – the grumpy musicians have been neither paid nor fed. They come across an acquaintance, an out of work driver who had previously been employed by a local transport firm. And it is at this moment that Weber's particular genius – the instinctive flair of the grasping opportunist – comes into play. There is a stir. The Führer has begun to speak, history is on the move. Weber's men are keen to get involved, but Weber stops them. The Nazis may be poised to take power, but Christian Weber has much more important fish to fry. His group sneaks off to the transport company's depot where Weber, in the name of the new authorities, requisitions three vehicles at gunpoint. He has been doing his homework and his scheme is, under the cover of the *putsch*, to loot certain wealthy Jewish households, to get his own hands on some of the booty "before Göring grabs it all," and if the odd Jew "loses a tooth" in the process, all well and good. There is just one small problem: no petrol, and none to be had in these times of crisis, not even for ready money... Two hours later his henchmen return empty-handed, just in time to be party to the news that Hitler's plan – equally opportunistic and half-baked – has likewise come to grief, the march into Munich has ended in a bloodbath, and an ignominious defeat for the Führer that only a subsequent rewriting of the truth- did he try heroically to protect a young child when the shooting started or did he panic and save his own skin? - will manage to gloss over.

Maybe it was the particularly shabby role that Hitler himself played in the grotesque tragi-comedy of the *putsch* that impelled him to commemorate the "martyrs" of the day with such ostentatious grandeur and ritual. A pompous neo-classical shrine on the grand scale, scene of an annual solemn act remembrance, was established in the centre of Munich on the Königsplatz, not many hundred yards from the spot on the Odeonsplatz where the victims of the police

fusillade fell⁵. Three policemen and fourteen pro-Hitler marchers died – well, as Rosendorfer wryly points out, one of the fourteen martyrs was in fact a waiter from a nearby café shot by accident, but he too was buried in a bronze coffin in the “Temple of Honour” and his name included on the memorial tablet set up at the “Field Marshal’s Hall,” despite protests from his family – perhaps so that there was a nice even number, Rosendorfer muses...

Weber has a genuine personal though by no means uncritical affection for Hitler, inasmuch as he is capable of affection for anyone but himself, for in Hitler he senses an at root kindred spirit – setting aside all the theorising and dreams of world domination - and because he supported the Führer from the outset he is able to lead a charmed life while the latter remains in power. He is, in Nazi terminology, one of the “old warriors,” one of the first-generation fascist bully-boys for whom Hitler seems to have retained particular loyalty. This apparently most admirable sentiment is, of course, bound up with the much more uncomfortable fact that men such as Weber, in on the act from the very beginning, know a great deal about the great man. We should not forget who was in that Munich bar the night that Iron Cross changed hands...And Weber has no compunction whatsoever about stooping to blackmail. On more than one occasion when his outrageous behaviour threatens to land him in hot water despite his excellent connections, Weber is not at all abashed to remind Hitler that he was there that evening long ago when a certain medal changed hands. Nor is this the only hold he has over his apparently all-powerful leader. Certain sketches of an intimate nature, made by Hitler of his niece Geli⁶, fall into Weber’s hands: when the opportunity to “acquire” them presents itself this outrageous but wily self-seeker is not slow to see their potential value. They turn up again in the plot when Weber tries to help out another “old comrade” who has fallen into disfavour – one Ernst

⁵ Some of the stones can still be seen on one of the street corners to-day, if one knows where to look.

⁶ The potentially very damaging scandal of Hitler’s relationship with Geli culminated in her suicide in 1931.

Röhm. Weber and he would seem, setting aside the former's sexual proclivities, to be very much out of the same mould. Röhm is sufficiently like Weber that he not only accepts his friend's help to twist the Führer's arm, he steals the sketches from Weber for his own use. Rosendorfer - and here his tongue does seem to firmly in his cheek - suggests that Weber wreaks a terrible revenge, and that it is he who instigates the "*Night of the Long Knives*"!⁷ In any case, Weber generally keeps a lower profile than Röhm. He does not wish to rival his Führer on the political stage - his sights are not set so high, he wants to line his own pockets and indulge his voracious appetites, not vie for ultimate power, thus he keeps his head.

Weber also gets away with it not least because he is a provincial who stays firmly in the provinces. Like many other of the original "old warriors" from the early Munich days of the movement, he has no liking for Berlin nor for what it stands for in terms of organisation and discipline, or indeed ultimate aspirations. There is little love lost between a Weber - or an Ernst Röhm - and the new elite. Indeed we can see Berlin as the administrative centre of the new Germany, its brain, while Munich and Bavaria remained the Nazi movement's heart: the festivals and spectacles of Nazism are strongly associated with Nuremberg and Munich, building on folk traditions originating in the mediaeval period (from *bierfest* to rally, as it were!). These traditions are still very much alive in the predominantly Catholic South and West, in contrast to the stereotype of the Protestant, "Prussian" North, and it is in Munich and the surrounding area that nearly all the action of the novel, not least its centrepiece the "*Night of the Amazons*" itself is set.

With Hitler in power from 1933 Weber has a finger in nearly every pie in Munich and the surrounding area. His totally undeserved rise to wealth, status, prestige and influence run alongside that of his Führer. On the local scene his ascent is meteoric. Christian Weber, the one-time stable-hand, becomes in the nineteen-thirties Christian

⁷ The ruthless extermination of Ernst Röhm and other members of the SA in 1934.

Ludwig Weber, President! (Where did he get this grandiose middle name? Rosendorfer also wonders). President, one might ask, of what? From 1939 he bears the title of President of the Regional Parliament of Upper Bavaria. A grand but provincial office, and one conferring no real power in the new Germany. The very persuasive suggestion is that the regime kept the old political structures of the Weimar Republic largely intact while transferring all actual power to the Party, thus leaving intact a stock of sinecures to keep those such as Weber quietly content. This allowed Weber, a big fish in his chosen little pond, the opportunity to live on quite some scale. He undertook various “diplomatic” trips abroad, including to London - all splendid excuses no doubt for yet more self-indulgence - and saw to it that his 50th birthday was marked in grotesquely lavish style (the press describe it as “a simple celebration” with a poem in his honour recited by a young “maid’ in BDM uniform⁸ – and rounded off, though this is not reported – with a heavy drinking session with old comrades and a visit to a certain young lady named Frieda...)To crown it all, and the word is appropriate in more than one sense, Weber moved into apartments in the former Royal Residence, once the Munich home of the King of Bavaria – the private reactions of locals in the know was suitably ironic...

His private enterprise concentrated, despite the failure of his planned looting spree at the time of the *putsch* (a similar scheme, carried out under the smoke-screen of *Kristallnacht*,⁹ was reportedly much more successful), on transport and travel. He developed a Toad of Toad Hall- like enthusiasm for automobiles. If anyone crossed his path when he was at the wheel, woe betide them; the courts were certainly unlikely to support any complaints against so senior and distinguished member of the Party. A grand vehicle, chauffeur and petrol were still at his disposal when Hitler’s empire had already

⁸ The “Bund Deutscher Mädel” (Association of German Girls) was set up in parallel to the Hitler Youth movement for teenage boys.

⁹ A nickname for a series of orchestrated attacks on Jewish citizens, especially Jewish-owned businesses, in 1938.

begun to fall apart: he kept his own secret supply of fuel. In the course of time he had set up at least two of his own companies, shamelessly using his positions of influence in the Bavarian administration to further his own ends: from April 1936 the local taxi drivers are forbidden to offer tours of Munich to visitors; the monopoly is to be enjoyed by a certain "Christian Weber Travel." He also controlled some of the lucrative local bus lines and on these routes anyone offering a lift in a private car to a potential bus passenger ran the risk of being prosecuted for breaking local regulations on public conveyances...

Weber's financial machinations, as documented by Rosendorfer, with his lawyer's eye, were endless, nor did he fight shy of fleecing the movement that had brought him influence and wealth. He seems to have managed to siphon off a good portion of the Munich municipal contributions to Nazi party funds into his private bank account.

If Weber has one passion equal to his desire for self-aggrandisement and self-indulgence it is a love of horses. His early "career," which he is subsequently at pains to consign to obscurity, indeed to falsify, was as a lowly stable-hand, and his interest in horses was to remain. Indeed a major element of his excessive ambition is a desire to be acknowledged as an equine connoisseur, to be the owner of stables and racing thoroughbreds. As the Nazi regime establishes itself and its functionaries begin to enjoy rich pickings it is the acquisition of horses and stables that is one of Weber's prime concerns.

And what for a confirmed bachelor and lecher could be a more beguiling image than that of a shapely, naked and, naturally, Aryan, Germanic beauty astride a fine horse? Thus was born the idea for the "Night of the Amazons."

Processions are dear to the heart of the traditional Bavarian, parades and German culture to that of the now all-powerful regime. After meddling unsuccessfully in the theatre – he was later to try the same in films – and thereby incurring the wrath of Goebbels himself, in 1934 Weber founded the "Society for the German Brown Ribband" to

promote Germany as a world centre for equine sport. His vision was an international equine arena south of Munich, and if the war and the almost inevitable catastrophe had been avoided, who knows what his conniving skills and tenacious egotism might have achieved! In the meanwhile races were held at the Munich track annually from 1936 until the outbreak of war, and coming out of this event in 1936, 1937 and 1938, emerged the “Night of the Amazons,” a ludicrously overblown pageant, with firework display, for a summer’s evening, the great attraction of which was a generous supply of hand-picked naked girls, borne on floats in glittering tableaux, for example, or trotting by on horseback with spear and helmet as mounted Amazons. The supply of healthy young Aryans was, of course, plentiful enough – the cult of the naked human form was an essential aspect of the “new” German culture, and the girls of the BDM could easily enough be persuaded to see that appearing in such dubious extravaganzas was nothing less than a patriotic duty – and, as one very respectable lady of advancing years quite recently interviewed for television readily related from her own experiences of the time, great fun.¹⁰ There were problems, however. The girls could get very cold even though the event was held in July, and riding too fast bare-breasted did have its inconveniences...None of this prevented Christian Weber from thoroughly enjoying himself, and having the girls presented to him personally – Rosendorfer doubts that he left it at a polite handshake...

All this laughably overdone show gives the author an opportunity to imagine for us a delightfully comic scene. A certain SS-man Staudigl asks for a confidential interview with a superior officer, a certain Obersturmführer...The distressed and tearful Staudigl is concerned about his fiancée, a member of the BDM and a horsewoman. Their relationship has remained chaste, but now Ilse has been recruited as an Amazon. She seems to be quite enjoying herself, but Staudigl finds it all very hard to bear. Her nakedness until now saved up for the marriage-bed is now being displayed for the delectation of thousands

¹⁰ Laurence Rees, *Chaos and Consent* from *The Nazis: A Warning From History* BBC Television series and BBC Consumer Publishing (Books) 1997.

of onlookers. The Obersturmführer tries to console him: a German girl of pure race has nothing to hide... Would he like a complimentary ticket to the next performance?... What, finally, can they do against the will of so highly regarded an "old warrior" as Weber. In despair Staudigl decides to take the honourable way out – but in the end he doesn't shoot himself.

As with his leader, Weber too rides the crest of the wave until Nemesis calls him to account. Again as with Hitler, his end is uncertain. He survives a terrifying air raid on Munich town centre, and an attempted anti-Nazi coup in the area right at the end of the war, when various military units rebelled in an effort to minimise the carnage and destruction. Confusion reigns, but appropriately enough Weber seems to have met his end by falling off the back of a lorry.

Or does he? Towards the end of his narrative Rosendorfer has at least one more trick up his sleeve. What in this work, he asks us finally, with all its very convincing and detailed documentation is actually true, what is fiction? He teases and unsettles his readers, challenges them to work it out. Some inventions are obvious, some not. Documented history is, Rosendorfer suggests, a pale reflection of reality. We must invent, in this case with all the means that intimate knowledge of Munich and the Bavarians puts at his disposal, in order really to get to the bottom of things. "Art tells lies in order to tell the truth" is a maxim that goes well beyond the machinations of post-modernism.