

**IN THE GARDEN OF BEASTS, LOVE, TERROR, AND AN  
AMERICAN FAMILY IN HITLER'S BERLIN<sup>1</sup>**

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*With that speech, Dodd embarked on a campaign to raise the alarm about Hitler and his plans, and to combat the increasing drift in America toward isolationism; later he would be dubbed the Cassandra of American diplomats. . . . He predicted, moreover, that Hitler would be free to pursue his ambitions without armed resistance from other European democracies, as they would choose concessions over war.<sup>2</sup>*

**The Cause of the Blindness**

There is no doubt that in retrospect, Hitler was evil. The question then becomes, why was the world not able to see Hitler for what he was, before it became too late? The reader might be surprised to learn that Ambassador William Dodd made the speech referenced above in 1938, well after he had resigned his post as Ambassador to Germany and returned to America. After all, one hopes that America was not complicit in Hitler's rise, that she did not ignore a rational voice. In his latest book, *In the Garden of Beasts, Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin*, Erik Larson<sup>3</sup> shows readers pre-World War II Berlin

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<sup>1</sup> ERIC LARSON, *IN THE GARDEN OF BEASTS, LOVE, TERROR, AND AN AMERICAN FAMILY IN HITLER'S BERLIN* (2011).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 350. Cassandra was a tragic figure from Greek mythology. She was the daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy, and described as one of the most beautiful women of her time. Her beauty caught the eye of Apollo, who granted her the gift of prophesy, in exchange for her love. When she failed to return his affections, he cursed her by causing no one to believe her predictions. Cassandra foresaw the destruction of Troy and her own death, but as no one would believe her, she was powerless to stop it and went insane in the process. AESCHYLUS, *AGAMEMNON* 75-78 (Richmond Lattimore ed., trans., Univ. of Chicago Press 1953) (458 B.C.).

<sup>3</sup> According to his website, Eric Larson is a *New York Times* Best Selling author. As one peruses Larson's other works, such as *Devil in the White City* and *Issac's Storm*, one can see that his specialty is historical non-fiction, but written in a sensational way to entice a reader to view the world and the time through a prominent personality. Eschewing the more academic and detailed treatment of history and events, Larson chooses to appeal to

through the eyes of its Ambassador, William Dodd, and his daughter, Martha Dodd. Using their diaries and other personal writings, he takes readers into the privileged and extremely insular world of American diplomacy during one of the most crucial times in history. Larson looks at Germany and Hitler from the perspective of the Dodd family and through them, attempts to answer the question of why Dodd as Ambassador, and moreover America, failed to recognize the monster that became Adolf Hitler.<sup>4</sup> The result is a vivid account of life in Berlin from 1933–1937, one that is eminently readable, if not particularly academic or analytical. This review examines Larson’s personality-based approach as to how America missed Hitler’s rise, looks at the more realistic and scholarly reasons for the success of Hitler, and concludes with a short prognostication on what we might learn from Larson’s observations.

#### **Larson’s Use of Personality-Focused Writing Limits the Possibility of His Analysis**

Larson’s stated purpose on the very first page of the book is to understand why no one recognized Hitler for what he was before it was too late.

I have always wondered what it would be like for an outsider to have witnessed firsthand the gathering dark of Hitler’s rule. How did the city look, what did one hear, see, and smell, and how did diplomats and other visitors interpret the events occurring around them? Hindsight tells us that during that fragile time the course of history could so easily have been changed. Why, then did no one change it? Why did it take so long to recognize the real danger posed by Hitler and his regime?<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, Larson never explicitly answers the question he sets out to answer through his characters, but after reading Larson’s book, the

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the broader base by using our current obsession with the cult of personality as his vehicle to present a historical event. Erik Larson, <http://ericlarsonbooks.com> (last visited July 27, 2012). Given the current popularity of reality television and “celebutants,” the best-selling nature of Eric Larson’s books, over that of a more academic and historical author such as Pulitzer Prize winner Doris Kearns Goodwin, should come as no surprise.

<sup>4</sup> LARSON, *supra* note 1, at xiii.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

reader can see that there were a number of failings along the road to World War II, both personal and systematic. This section will discuss Larson's implied answers to his thesis.

*The Role of Personality—How Did Dodd as a Person Play in Blinding America to the Truth about Hitler During This Crucial Time?*

Larson reveals that during his tenure as Ambassador, Dodd suffered from many of the same human weaknesses as all of the world's political leaders of the time, weaknesses which caused the West to fail to step in against Hitler during his first years. Though he recognized the truth of Hitler later in his tenure, even if he had recognized Hitler's end purpose from the start, Dodd had been marginalized by fellow diplomats for his frugality and lack of social birth, thereby diminishing his credibility.<sup>6</sup> Most disturbingly, Larson gently lays out the facts that Dodd was, as were many of the time, including Roosevelt,<sup>7</sup> prejudiced against Jews.<sup>8</sup> In focusing on the vulnerabilities and personal foibles of key players such as Dodd, his family and his German counterparts, Larson lays out in easy to read and understand prose how those weaknesses played a role in the crucial time preceding WWII.

*Inability to Imagine the Unimaginable*

In the moment of the mid-1930s, no one could imagine the scope of Hitler's cruelty. Through Dodd's daughter Martha's narrative, Larson shows how many were bedazzled by the show, the intellect and charm of German officials, the parties and the extravagance. Additionally, the seeming normalcy of German life on the street made many think the early reports of atrocities were not to be believed.<sup>9</sup> Even after the June 30, 1934, round-up and killing of the political opposition by Hitler, Dodd's reaction seems somewhat muted. He chose not to cancel his July 4th celebration or un-invite his German government guests.<sup>10</sup> At the time, the United States did not impose any travel restrictions on Americans seeking to tour Germany, finding no imminent danger.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 109–12, 216–17.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 28–29.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 165–66.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 50.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 322.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 325.

Germans themselves seemed indifferent to the purge.<sup>12</sup> Larson even portrays Dodd as less than outraged when he had to place a cotton-lined box over his telephone when it was not in use, believing it to be bugged.<sup>13</sup> Dodd, like the rest of the world, realized the truth too late, albeit before the rest of the nation. However, due to his marginalization, his dispatches and prognostications were ignored and he was ultimately labeled a Cassandra.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Hitler's Claims Toward Peace*

Hitler continued to profess peace and the author makes it clear that Dodd believed him. Dodd's meeting with Hitler on October 17, 1933, left him with no hint of Hitler's violent or militaristic intentions. Larson concluded, "Though the session had been difficult and strange, Dodd nonetheless left the chancellery feeling convinced that Hitler was sincere about wanting peace."<sup>15</sup> In telling the story through an American with such close proximity to Hitler, Larson implies that America likely had no chance at all of seeing Hitler's true intentions, despite all the obvious signs of military build-up.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Larson Never Really Answers His Own Question*

The author states that he intends to explore the world through the eyes of "his two innocents," Dodd and his daughter Martha.<sup>17</sup> But he never really answers the question posed in his thesis through his main characters. In reading the first few pages, Larson sets up the reader to expect significant historical analysis, to perhaps learn the dark secret of why Hitler rose unimpeded, to glean the magic lesson so that humanity will never again fall prey to a future Hitler. In the end however, Larson provides a small snippet of life in pre-war Berlin and leaves the reader to

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<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 328.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 225.

<sup>14</sup> See *supra* note 2 and accompanying text.

<sup>15</sup> LARSON, *supra* note 1, at 159.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 341. *Contra* EUGENE DAVIDSON, THE MAKING OF HITLER 317 (1977) (Davidson posits that in 1933, political leaders around the world could have no doubt about the Nazi threat, given the immense build-up of arms, plans for militarization of the police with eventual government takeover.).

<sup>17</sup> LARSON, *supra* note 1, at iv.

their own conclusions. The author should not have promised such lofty insight.

In truth, the book is divided evenly between historical descriptions of the events and chronicling the personal lives, frustrations, parties, sexual escapades, professional victories and disappointments of the Dodd family, mainly the ambassador and his daughter. In particular, Larson toes the water of titillation in describing Martha's multiple liaisons with both high-ranking American and German sexual partners.

[B]ut she knew sex and liked it, and especially liked the effect when a man learned the truth (that she was sexually experienced). "I suppose I practiced a great deception on the diplomatic corps by not indicating that I was a married woman at that time," she wrote. "But I must admit that I rather enjoyed being treated like a maiden of eighteen knowing all the while my dark secret."<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the author does this to make it more readable and reach a larger audience, or perhaps the wider American public cannot read a historical work of non-fiction without it. If Larson's true purpose is to present a historical lesson as to why the world was wrong about Hitler, then the inclusion of details of at least a dozen of Martha's dalliances is unnecessary, other than to be amusing and voyeuristic. Admittedly, her presence in the book does become interesting as an illustration of how a pro-German foreigner had to reluctantly evolve her view of Germany, Hitler, and Socialism as Hitler's power and brutality increased. However, other than the one time Martha was brought into Hitler's presence as a possible liaison,<sup>19</sup> Martha's sexual life is irrelevant to the historical analysis.

### **It's the Economy, Stupid**

In restricting the scope of the book to "personality," Larson leaves out many of the facts relevant to the analysis of why the world missed the boat on Hitler. Reading Larson's book was like having dessert before dinner and being left hungry. In choosing to focus on the narrow world

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<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 113.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 160–62.

of diplomacy, Larson does not discuss in depth the most prevalent reason for Hitler's rise, the German economy. Hence, it was interesting to learn that, as in many of the world's conflicts and troubles, economics was at the heart of Hitler's rise.

After World War I, the German people suffered not only an ignominious defeat on the world stage, injurious to their national pride, but a brutal lashing from the Great Depression. Hitler promised to get the German people out of the economic crisis and restore national pride.<sup>20</sup> He did, in fact, institute many economic policies which benefited the German working and middle class, and brought support for the Nazi party.<sup>21</sup> To the public, non-Jewish German, Hitler was a politician who brought a future.<sup>22</sup>

Eugene Davidson elaborates on why Hitler was so successful:

The German society had withstood the shock of the lost war, the exactions and arrogance of the victors, the invasion of the Ruhr and Rhineland; it had survived the inflation and recurrent economic depressions; but the accumulation of all of them was too much. Too much at least for the almost 19 million out of 36.8 million voters who in July 1932 voted for the anti-republican parties of the National Socialist and the Communists. . . . Even Reichswehr generals like Hammerstein and Bussche, who continued to dislike and mistrust him, when forced to make hard decisions undoubtedly preferred a Hitler to a Papen cabinet with the promise of civil bloodletting.<sup>23</sup>

In hindsight, there is only black and white; we can only see Hitler as a terrible monster with no room for shades of gray. But Larson does give readers a glimpse into Hitler's charisma through Martha. Martha is drawn to him as were so many in his time. Larson uses Martha to show

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<sup>20</sup> Jacob G. Hornberger, *Why Germans Supported Hitler, Part 2* (July 18, 2007), <http://www.fff.org/freedom/fd0703a.asp>.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> EUGENE DAVIDSON, *THE MAKING OF ADOLF HITLER 366-67* (1977). Cf. OTIS C. MITCHELL, *HITLER OVER GERMANY, THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NAZI DICTATORSHIP 194-205 (1918-1934)*. Mitchell details a number of different factors which contributed to Hitler's rise to power, including, interestingly, the fact that Hitler had no plan or blueprint for his final takeover.

how Hitler offered many positives, and presented a vision that appealed to a German people who had been broken down, demoralized and economically devastated after World War I. But Martha, an intellectual lightweight, socialite and flibbertigibbet at best, cannot offer any substantive economic analysis through her observations.

***In the Garden of Beasts* Is Useful as an Illustration of Why We  
Became the World's Policeman**

The reader may struggle with blaming Dodd for not taking a stronger stand, as he was in such an influential position during this crucial time. But understanding the historical context of why there was such a possibility for human blindness to a Hitler is crucial in not repeating such a mistake. Larson makes clear and helps provide historical context and understanding that it was not just Dodd who had perception issues, but many leaders and much of the world as well. Seventy years later, the world is perhaps still skittish from allowing Hitler to do what he did. One can argue that America acts as the world's military and economic policeman, getting involved in conflicts like Grenada, Panama, Somalia, Kuwait, Iraq, Afghanistan, and recently the Arab Spring, to ensure a "Hitler" never happens again. Hitler opened our eyes to the danger of isolationism. Fortunately, we will never know if Saddam Hussein or Osama Bin Laden was the next Adolf Hitler, as we have learned our lesson about what happens when the world turns a blind eye to a rising dictator.

**Sources**

In the sources and acknowledgement section, it is clear that Larsen did extensive research, interviews, and travel for the book, much of it quite scholarly in its scope.<sup>24</sup> But in choosing to focus the book on the personality, foibles, and other personal characteristics of the players involved limits his stated thesis. Certainly, if he meant to write an absorbing, readable voyeuristic work of non-fiction into Hitler's rise, he did an excellent job. After all, Larson is heralded as a writer who uses historical personalities, who writes non-fiction as if it were fiction.<sup>25</sup> Yet examining the endnotes in the back of this book, the majority of his

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<sup>24</sup> LARSON, *supra* note 1, at 369–75.

<sup>25</sup> See *supra* note 3 and accompanying text.

citations are personal papers, letters, and unpublished diaries of the Dodd family and personal biographies of leaders of the time.<sup>26</sup> Throughout the book, Larson often mentions a sentence or idea from one of Dodd's official dispatches, yet he rarely quotes the actual language at any length. Using more direct quotations to diplomatic papers would certainly have given the work more muscle.

### A Useful Vignette for Leadership Lessons and Today's JAG Corps

*In the Garden of Beasts* may serve as a cautionary tale of leadership mistakes. Dodd railed continually against the established diplomatic community he called the "Pretty Good Club" and their extravagances.<sup>27</sup> In doing so, he earned the ire of the diplomatic corps, which swiftly marginalized him intellectually. Perhaps the lesson is obvious: do not bite, or criticize so loudly, the very establishment you represent if you wish to still be part of the club and be heard. Or perhaps the converse is the lesson: do not ignore the message because of the social status of the messenger. Judge Advocates are often taught a variation of this lesson—earn the credibility of the command by learning what the unit does, fit in, speak the language, but be prepared to speak up and defend your position if you are legally correct. Dodd became a clear example of what happens when you make no effort to fit in but have an important message later on that goes ignored. The author does a good job of illustrating a leadership mistake.

### Conclusion

While *In the Garden of the Beasts* is an absorbing and even at times scintillating read, it does not enter the heavyweight class of historical writing. Larson sets out a weighty task, but never comes out with a clear answer. While his real life characters are well drawn, lively, and charismatic, they are able to shed only a dim light on the question of why it took so long to recognize Hitler for what he was. While Larson does serve a purpose with his "personality" approach because he shows clearly how personality can affect history, that approach limits the intellectual and academic impact of his work. However, if you want a fun

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<sup>26</sup> LARSON, *supra* note 1 at 377–434.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 109–12.



summer beach read with a serious cover to impress your friends, this is the book.