

refuses to come to life, in part because Rayfield is determined to keep the man and the artist almost entirely separate. "Biography is not criticism," he declares in his preface. Plays and stories alike are passed over at breathless speed. Rayfield prefers to lunge from phase to phase of Chekhov's domestic life, working his way forward in brief chapters based on almost a day-by-day chronology. Friends and relations wander in and out of the narrative, and we learn how many pounds of pork breast and candles were delivered to Chekhov's Melikhovo estate on April 15, 1893. It is not long before the reader is overwhelmed with data, some important, much trivial. Of course, there is plenty to mull over here at conferences and Russian lit seminars, but notwithstanding the generous praise from Arthur Miller on the dust jacket, the general reader is likely to fall by the wayside long before journey's end.

Callow, by contrast, brings a novelist's lighter touch to the proceedings. Though

he has not studied Russian and has never visited Chekhov's homeland, he sketches vignettes that bear eloquent tribute to a writer who bore "the stigma of genius." Callow openly acknowledges his debt to Rayfield's two studies, but makes a much more satisfactory job of sculpting the raw material. If his book is unlikely to displace V. S. Pritchett's earlier biography, it still offers an elegant introduction to an enigmatic chronicler of a dying world.

"Enigmatic" indeed seems an understatement where Chekhov is concerned. Both biographers address the perennial argument over the comic element in the plays. On the surface, Chekhov's own views appear explicit: *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Seagull* are both described in the text as comedies. Stanislavsky seems to have preferred to see all of the late dramas as essentially tragic. Subsequent generations have had their own views. Almost a hundred years later, we are still listening to the laughter in the dark.

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History

SECRECY: *The American Experience*.

By Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

Yale Univ. Press. 265 pp. \$22.50

Chairing a congressional commission on government secrecy in 1996, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) appended to its report one of the more brilliant historical essays to be found in the huge and generally lackluster archives of committee prints. Now he has expanded that essay into a book, providing a broader context for, and bringing new urgency to, the growing debate over how much secrecy the government needs.

Whatever may have been true in Asian despotisms or even in Europe, in the United States secrecy developed as a consequence of the great international conflicts of the 20th century, with that development most extensive during the administration of Woodrow Wilson. In 1915, Wilson called on Congress to pass laws to "crush out" those "born under other flags . . . who have poured the poison of disloyalty into the very arteries of our national life." "No president," Moynihan observes severely,

"had ever spoken like that before; none has since." Upon declaring war with Germany in 1917, Congress passed the Espionage Act. A clause granting extensive powers of censorship, for which Wilson lobbied passionately, was struck from the bill in the Senate by a single vote, but the penalties in the law remained harsh. A year later, Congress passed the even more severe Sedition Act, under which Eugene V. Debs, presidential candidate of the Socialist Party, was sentenced to 10 years in prison; a film producer was convicted because his movie, *The Spirit of '76*, was "anti-British"; and a minister got 15 years for suggesting that Jesus was a pacifist.

As well as pointing to such excesses of the past, Moynihan develops the housekeeping case for limiting government secrecy: far too many documents are classified and many are overclassified, practices that are expensive and wasteful. While the Clinton administration has reduced the number of officers and officials classifying documents, the number of documents classified has gone up. Higher productivity!

But the author is not principally concerned with housekeeping. He argues that secrecy is bad in itself. For one thing, it protects incompetence. He castigates the Central Intelligence Agency for its long string of blunders, from misjudging Fidel Castro's strength to failing to foresee the collapse of the Soviet Union. (Moynihan himself predicted that event as early as 1984.) He questions whether the Agency deserves to survive, and mocks President Clinton's suggestion that it mobilize against drug smugglers. To do that, Moynihan says acidly, it would have to compete with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

The author does not contend that all secrecy is bad. "We are not going to put an end to secrecy, nor should we. But a culture of secrecy . . . need not remain the norm." He agrees with George F. Kennan, who, after spending a lifetime at the heart of the secret relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union, concluded that 95 percent of what we need to know about foreign countries could be obtained "by careful and competent study of perfectly legitimate sources" in American libraries.

Moynihan has forcefully initiated a debate on how much secrecy the government needs. And he has made a persuasive opening argument that the quantum should be minimal.

—Godfrey Hodgson

EXPLAINING HITLER.

By Ron Rosenbaum. Random House. 496 pp. \$30

Explaining Hitler tests the proposition that a book should not be judged by its cover. Rosenbaum's cover features a picture of a cuddly infant Adolf Hitler. The photograph is a distasteful provocation, but it is consistent with the author's attempt to jolt readers out of assumptions about the career of the Führer.

Rosenbaum seeks to show that the origins of Hitler's evil remain unclear. The author maintains that nothing about the development of Hitler's character should be assumed, that motives have been retroactively ascribed to Hitler that he may never have possessed, and that these ascriptions explain more about the would-be explainer than about Hitler himself. Was the man an idealist supremely convinced of his own rectitude, or a clever mountebank, an actor lusting for power who ruthlessly exploited both his camarilla and his nation for personal gratification?

In the hope of answering such questions,

Rosenbaum examines in minute detail an academic subfield that might be called Hitlerology. He has produced, you might say, a book about the books about Hitler. No theory seems too obscure, no notion too bizarre, no proposition too outlandish, for Rosenbaum to examine, ponder, and remark upon it with a kind of tender solicitude. The chapter subtitles give a taste of his method: "In which we meet two generations of Hitler family con artists." Or: "In which we unearth a lost classic of Hitler explanation by a murdered explainer." The wackiness of Rosenbaum's quest makes for a strangely engrossing book.

Rosenbaum, an author and *New York Observer* columnist devotes much of his energy to chapter-long conversations with Alan Bullock, Hugh Trevor-Roper, George Steiner, Berel Lang, and other Hitler scholars. He paints a less than flattering portrait of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, the author of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996), who, when caught in a contradiction, ends the interview with a feeble excuse about contractual obligations to his publisher. And he contrasts Bullock, who wrote the classic biography of Hitler as adventurer, with Trevor-Roper, who continues to see Hitler as the dupe of his own beliefs.



The peculiar paths many of these sessions stray onto is perhaps exemplified by Steiner's outrageous remarks. "The horror of the thing [Auschwitz] is we have lowered the threshold of mankind," he said, adding: "We are that which has shown mankind to be ultimately bestial."

When Rosenbaum plunges into the murk of competing Freudian theorists, the longueurs arrive. Several of these theorists see the genesis of the Final Solution in Hitler's supposed coprophilic urges for his niece; others, in his rage at a Jewish doctor who diagnosed (misdiagnosed?) his mother, Klara. Some readers may find the extensive chart of the prices and weight of iodoform gauze bought in five-meter strips in Austria in 1907 more instructive than others.

Rosenbaum's most illuminating chapter—it

alone makes his book must-reading—centers on a newspaper, the *Munich Post*, that relentlessly attacked Hitler before he came to power. “The running battle between Hitler and the courageous reporters and editors of the *Post*,” writes Rosenbaum, “is one of the great unreported dramas in the history of journalism—and a long-erased chapter in the chronology of attempts to explain Adolf Hitler.” The editors knew full well that Hitler was not just an adventurer but a fanatical ideologue. Rosenbaum shows that the newspaper produced numerous exposés of sexual scandals in the Nazi Party, and even a dispatch, on December 9, 1931, about a plan for the extermination of German Jews: “For the final solution of the Jewish question it is proposed to use the Jews in Germany for slave labor or for cultivation of the German swamps administered by a special SS division.” There is a bracing clarity to the *Post*’s portrayal of Hitler that seems to have gotten lost in much of the of modern scholarship so carefully chronicled by Rosenbaum.

—Jacob Heilbrunn

MY GERMAN QUESTION:

Growing Up in Nazi Berlin.

By Peter Gay. Yale Univ. Press. 208 pp. \$22.50

Historian Peter Gay introduces this memoir of his youth in Nazi Berlin and his family’s forced emigration with an epigraph from Christopher Marlowe’s *Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*: “Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.” In adding to the sky-high stack of Holocaust-related memoirs of recent years, the eminent chronicler of the Victorian era seeks to create something more complex and subtle than merely another tale of suffering. Gay wants to sketch two essentially interior landscapes: first, the psychological and behavioral effects of what he experienced during those years of ceaseless Nazi propaganda and gathering threat; second, the terrifying pressures and obstacles that allowed so many German Jews to wait in seeming passivity for disaster to strike.

The image of lambs-to-the-slaughter paralysis still angers him—although his father in fact mustered his nerve and got the family out in 1939. “‘It was all in *Mein Kampf*’ has long been the litany of our detractors, who, without an inkling of what uprooting oneself meant and how hard it was to read the signals, reproached me or my parents for not having packed up on January 30, 1933, and left the

country the same day,” Gay writes. This is one of the few passages where we glimpse the abiding rage that the Nazi experience instilled in him, together with an arsenal of ways to repress it. When he first stepped on American soil, “Berlin seemed far away, but that was an illusion; for years I would pick fragments of it from my skin as though I had wallowed among shards of broken glass.”

The rage and repression are his true subject. In showing how it really was—not just the wounds to the psyche but the psyche’s self-protective, shrinking responses—he will rebut the simple-minded critique of those who behaved as his parents did. But the approach doesn’t quite work. The author dwells at length on the details of his defiantly normal daily life between 1933 and 1939, when his parents finally won passage on a boat to Havana. (They ultimately joined relatives in the United States.) We hear of his many “strategies” for hiding from the storm outside—his obsessive stamp collecting and sports watching; his early, entirely ordinary sexual fantasies. But without corresponding details of the storm outside, these details are just that: ordinary.

Gay remains oddly reticent about the storm itself, as if still partly in the grip of the insulating strategies that served him so well. Though there are flashes of horror, most descriptions are carefully general: “Sly and gross in turn, the anti-Semitic propaganda campaigns, calculated to drive us to despair, were so incessant, so repetitious, so all-embracing that it was nearly impossible to escape them.” Many key moments have escaped his memory entirely, from what he did in the evening after seeing the devastation of Kristallnacht to how he felt the day in April 1938 when he was forced to leave school. And the crucial matter of how his parents made the decision to emigrate—how they balanced the terrors of staying with the terrors ahead—is, to the reader’s surprise, never directly discussed. Is it because Gay does not know what his parents, now deceased, were thinking in those dark times? Or is it some deeper reluctance?

In the afterword, he writes that the memoir has been “the least exhilarating” of his many writing projects, and that, contrary to cliché, plumbing his traumas has brought no catharsis. For the reader, too, this otherwise graceful work of analysis lacks the vividness that could create true empathy.

—Amy E. Schwartz