

Was Hitler a Socialist?

Hitler was undoubtedly an anti-capitalist and a socialist in the modern sense of the word



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A recurring theme in Elon Musk's posts on X in recent months has been his claim that Hitler was a socialist. He has received both a great deal of support and a great deal of criticism on the platform, but hardly any of those taking part in the debate have seriously examined the issue. Critics of the thesis point out that the means of production were not nationalized in National Socialist Germany. They also argue that the fact that Hitler had communists and Social Democrats imprisoned in concentration camps speaks against this thesis.

The second argument is not convincing. Stalin, too, had tens of thousands of fellow communists murdered, denouncing many of them as "Trotskyists," or "fascist agents." But what about the argument that the means of production were not nationalized on a large scale in National Socialist Germany?

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For traditional socialism, which is based on the teachings of Karl Marx, the nationalization of the means of production is indeed the central objective. But National Socialism was a form of modern socialism that took a different approach.

In May 1937 Hitler declared that he told German industry what it had to produce under the Four-Year Plan. If industry said it was unable to do so, he would “take the over myself, but it must be done.” If industry complied, however, he was glad not to have to take it over himself.

That such statements by Hitler were not empty threats became clear to the industrialists no later than on 23 July 1937, when Göring announced the formation of the AG for Ore Mining and Iron Smelting Hermann Göring. The development which had begun with Hitler’s and Göring’s repeated threats finally led to the creation of the Reichswerke Hermann Göring, which by 1940 employed 600,000 people. The plant in Salzgitter finally became the largest in Europe.

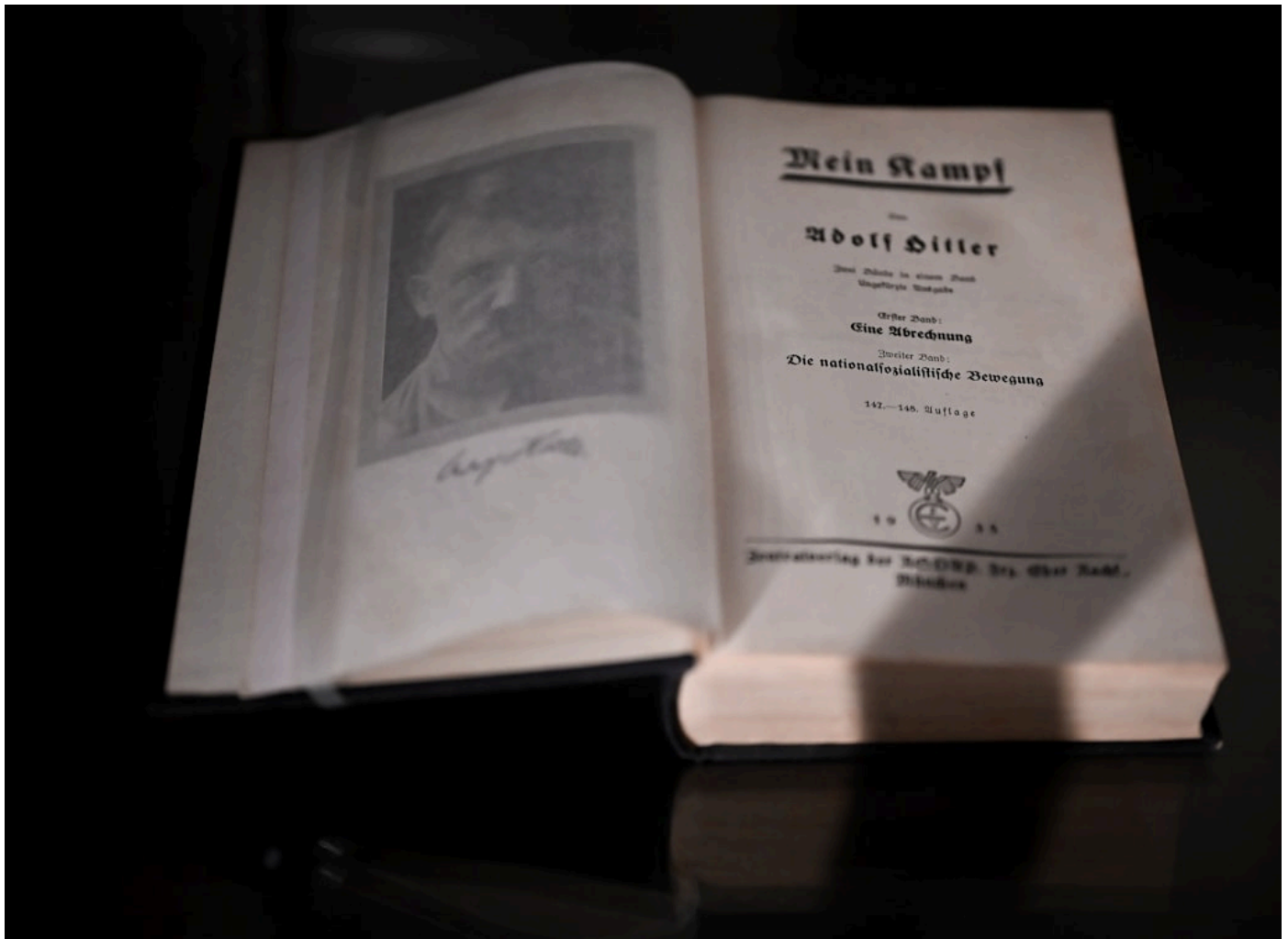


Photo by [Gabriela](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Some theorists – both on the left and among libertarians – recognized as early as the 1940s that National Socialism represented a new form of anti-capitalism. The economist and sociologist Friedrich Pollock had earned his doctorate with a dissertation on Karl Marx's theory of money and was a co-founder of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt am Main. Ludwig von Mises was known to be, together with Friedrich August von Hayek, the most important representative of the Austrian School of National Economics. Both were staunch opponents of National Socialism and emigrated to the United States.

In an article on the economic system of National Socialism published in 1941, Pollock acknowledged that the legal institution of private ownership had been maintained, argued that its actual function had fundamentally changed. In his words, this amounted to “the destruction of all the essential traits of private ownership, saving one exception.” Even the largest companies, he noted, had lost the right to decide freely where to invest or when to discontinue unprofitable production; these rights had effectively been transferred to the ruling groups.

This is one of the most lucid analyses of the economic structure of National Socialism and it corresponds with what Ludwig von Mises wrote in *The New York Times* on July 21, 1941. Mises argued that the German system of socialism, or *Zwangswirtschaft*, retained some capitalist institutions only nominally. Private ownership formally continued, but entrepreneurs had effectively been reduced to the status of shop managers, while the government determined what and how they produced, as well as prices and trading partners. He summarized the system as “socialism with the outward appearance of capitalism” – comprehensive planning and government control of economic activity, while retaining the labels of a market economy.

From 1940 at the latest, Hitler increasingly became a proponent of the state planned economy – partly because he was convinced of the superiority of the Soviet Union and its economic system. In his monologues to his inner circle (known as “table talks”) on 27/28 July 1941, Hitler said that “A sensible employment of the powers of a nation c

only be achieved with a planned economy from above.” About two weeks later, he remarked that economic planning was still at an early stage and envisioned building an encompassing German and European economic order.

The statement that economic planning was still at a very early stage is important because it shows that Hitler was not thinking at all of a reduction of state intervention – not even for the time after the war – but, on the contrary, intended to expand the instruments of state control of the economy even further.

Yes, Hitler was not a socialist in the classical Marxist sense. But he was undoubtedly an anti-capitalist and a socialist in the modern sense of the word. In this respect, Musk is right.

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