

ENGL 4670
J. Comas
13 Nov 2014

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL, HISTORICAL, AND TEXT NOTES ON K. BURKE'S "THE RHETORIC OF HITLER'S 'BATTLE'"

The composition and publication of Burke's "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" took place at a pivotal time in the events leading up to the second world war, especially events that began to shape American perception of the situation in Europe more than two years before the US entered the war. The purpose of these notes, then, is to provide some background information, especially information pertaining to Burke's immediate audience, the left intelligentsia in America.

I. Bibliographical Note

Originally published in *Southern Review* 5 (Summer 1939): 1-21. At this time, the *Southern Review*, edited by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, was a leading venue for modernist literature and what would become known, a couple of years later, as "new criticism." Burke's essay was the lead article in an issue with several articles on the state of democracy during the rise of European fascism, including R. M. MacIver's "The Genius of Democracy" and Willmoore Kendall's "On the Preservation of Democracy for America." The publication venue is worth noting, in part, because Brooks, Warren, and other New Critics often are portrayed simplistically as apolitical or politically right-wing. As you will see below, Burke's essay was written primarily for the left-wing intelligentsia.

II. Chronology & Historical Notes

There is a good deal that could be added to this chronology, especially toward the end. But my only intent is (1) to give you some detailed information about events immediately preceding and following the presentation and publication of Burke's essay and (2) some sense of its temporal relationship to "Four Master Tropes," published two years later, on the eve of US entry into the war. Some of the information in this chronology comes from an excellent account of the historical situation of Burke's essay, Garth Pauley's "Criticism in Context: Kenneth Burke's 'The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle,'" *KB Journal* 6, no. 1 (2009): n. pag. http://www.kbjournal.org/garth_pauley.

1938

Sep 29 - Munich Agreement: Britain and France acquiesce to German demand to annex a German-speaking portion of Czechoslovakia in return for a stable Europe. Burke alludes to this Agreement in his second paragraph.

Nov 09–10 - *Kristallnacht* ("Night of Broken Glass"): Series of coordinated attacks against Jews in Germany and Austria by paramilitary groups and other civilians; resulted in international outrage and now regarded as the beginning of the Holocaust. The project of publishing an English translation of the entire *Mein Kampf* was, to a significant degree, a response to *Kristallnacht* and a growing awareness of the consequences of German fascism.

1939

Feb 28 - Publication of two English translations of the complete text of *Mein Kampf*, including the translation to which Burke refers, supervised by the economist Alvin Johnson at the New School for Social Research. This translation is available online: <https://archive.org/download/meinkampf035176mbp/meinkampf035176mbp.pdf>

Apr 01 - Spanish Civil War ends; Franco becomes dictator.

May 22 - "Pact of Steel" between Italy and Germany.

Jun 04 - Burke delivers a version of "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" at the Third American Writers Congress in New York City, organized by the League of American Writers. The

paper was delivered at a session titled "The Writer in Politics"; and among the attendees was the young Ralph Ellison, who later wrote the following in a letter to Burke:

My real debt lies to you in the many things I've learned (and continue to learn) from your work... . That is a debt I shall never stop paying back and it begins back in the thirties when you read the rhetoric of "Hitler's Battle" before the League of American Writers, at the New School (I believe you were the only speaker out of the whole group who was concerned with writing *and* politics, rather than writing as an *excuse* for politics—and that in a superficial manner). (qtd. in Pauley)

When we discuss this essay, I want to take advantage of Ellison's comment because it points toward an important rhetorical aspect of Burke's essay that we tend to overlook in focusing on his analysis of Hitler; that is, Burke's essay is an attempt to persuade the American intelligentsia, especially those on the left, how best to write about fascism and deal with quickly changing political conditions in Europe. For example, just weeks prior to Burke's presentation at the Writer's Congress, the American Writers League had attempted to dissuade the Book-of-the-Month Club from featuring the new translation of *Mein Kampf* (Pauley).

Jul - *Southern Review* publishes "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'"

Aug 23 - Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact: In the US (as well as Europe) this pact resulted in an intellectual/moral/political dilemma for Popular Front groups, which had formed anti-fascist alliances with Soviets, including the League of American Writers: should one follow the anti-war lead of the Soviets or advocate for armed struggle as with previous support for the Spanish Republicans?

Sep 01 - Germany invades Poland, initiating the second world war.

1941

Oct - Burke's "Four Master Tropes" published in *The Kenyon Review*

Dec 07 - US enters war after bombing of Pearl Harbor

III. Text Notes

1. The English translation to which Burke refers in his opening sentence is Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf, Complete and Unabridged, Fully Annotated*, ed. John Chamberlain, et al. (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939).
2. In his second paragraph, Burke writes that Hitler's book should be studied "not merely to discover some grounds for prophesying what political move is to follow Munich" (191); this is a reference to the Munich Agreement of September 1938, in which Britain and France acquiesced to Hitler's demand to annex western Czechoslovakia in return for a stable Europe. (The Munich Agreement is the source of British Prime Minister Chamberlain's tragically ironic "Peace in our time" statement.)
3. On p. 193, the reference to "Russell" is to British philosopher Bertrand Russell and his book *Analysis of Mind* (1921).
4. On p. 214, Burke quotes a passage from Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. This passage can be found on p. 50 of *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1950).