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Carni-Fuhrer

Why one vegetarian activist is obsessed with Hitler's diet.

By *Alex Frangos*

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Rynn Berry wants to set the record straight about Adolf Hitler. "There's absolutely no evidence he was a vegetarian. It simply isn't true." Berry, a 54-year-old raw-foodist and "vegetarian historian" who is the author of *Food for the Gods: Vegetarianism and the World's Religions*, is on a mission to dispel the commonly held view that the 20th century's most notorious mass murderer was also an adamant herbivore.

I first learned of Berry this winter while listening to the radio. An adviser to the North American Vegetarian Society, Berry was on lefty WBAI's weekly animal-rights show, "Walden's Pond," to explain what Hitler *really* ate for dinner. According to his research, while Hitler for the most part followed a vegetarian diet, some of his favorite treats were liver dumplings, ham, and caviar. "Mainstream historians have an elastic definition of vegetarianism," he says. "They don't hold Hitler to the same standards as a practicing ethical vegetarian. You can't be a vegetarian and eat liver dumplings." But Berry's quest raises some obvious questions: Why investigate what Hitler ate? Does it matter, considering his ghastly crimes?

It matters to Berry. He, like other devout vegetarians, whose diets are inextricably linked to their self-avowed, pacifistic lifestyles, can't stand being associated with Hitler. Berry neither eats nor wears animal products and avoids all cooked foods. He first became interested in Hitler's diet after he wrote a book in 1990 called *Famous Vegetarians and Their Favorite Recipes*. It includes Leonardo di Vinci's love for fried figs and beans; George Bernard Shaw's favorite, brussels sprouts casserole; and Plutarch's classic, asparagus with tahini. It doesn't, however, include any mention of Hitler. At talks and seminars, Berry says, it's rare that someone doesn't point out the omission: "I've been the target of a lot of abuse and taunts from hostile non-vegetarians who bring out the alleged fact of Hitler's vegetarianism and tax me for not having put him the book."

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Berry's new book, *Hitler: Neither Vegetarian nor Animal Lover*, is an attempt to clear the table on what we know about Hitler's diet. The book, published by Pythagorean—a small house that specializes in vegetarian and animal-rights topics (and named after the Greek genius, Pythagoras, who was apparently history's first famous vegetarian)—is a slim paperback whose cover features a black-and-white photo of Hitler dining with Neville Chamberlain. There's a plate of appetizers on the table, but it's hard to tell if there's meat in them. In any case, Hitler looks like he has other things on his mind.

While the book doesn't quote any primary sources, the secondary sources Berry uses—newspaper articles, memoirs, other historical texts—seem reputable. The generally accepted idea about Hitler's nutritional regime seems to be that he at least tried to be a vegetarian. Sometime in the early 1930s, after the mysterious death of his niece and confidant, Geli, Hitler swore off meat. Some say seeing her corpse turned his stomach away from flesh. Others say his doctors put the despot on a vegetable-only diet to relieve excessive flatulence and sweating.

Berry asserts that propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels furthered the notion of Hitler as a strict vegetarian to make the ruthless dictator seem like an ascetic without vices who neither drank, nor smoked, nor ate meat, and was devoted above all to his people. Most lies told by the Third Reich were exposed in the postwar years, but not this one, according to Berry. "It's too good a story for [historians] to spoil it with the truth," he says. "They relish the paradox that a genocidal tyrant might have observed a Gandhian diet."

In his book, Berry cites written accounts—mostly articles and history texts—that show the instigator of World War II on occasion indulged in carnivorous delights. A 1937 *New York Times* profile called "At Home with the Furher," for example, describes Hitler as a vegetarian, though notes that he "occasionally relishes a slice of ham." (Hitler apparently celebrated Germany's 1938 annexation of Czechoslovakia with a slice of ham, a Prague specialty.) And in her 1964 book, *The Gourmet Cooking School Cookbook*, Dione Lucas, who worked at a Hamburg hotel that Hitler frequented, writes, "I do not mean to spoil your appetite for stuffed squab, but you might be interested to know that it was a great favorite with Hitler. ... Let us not hold that against a fine recipe though."

Mainstream historians don't refute Berry's assertion that Hitler didn't meet contemporary vegetarian standards, but they do have trouble finding meaning in it. John Lukacs, author of *Hitler of History*, says that the German leader was "mostly a vegetarian," especially after 1938, when Hitler began to worry that his health was failing. That fact is useful in understanding Hitler's psychology before WWII and may explain why he went to war so soon after securing peaceful annexations from Chamberlain and others. But whether he was a strict vegetarian or not doesn't register with Lukacs. "What difference does it make? Hitler never cared much for food," he says, "Except he liked sweets. He had a weakness for creamy cakes, not for chocolates, Viennese creamy cakes. He had pastry cooks make him sweets until the end of his life, even in the bunker."

Berry's crusade might seem curious considering Hitler's unspeakable crimes toward his fellow man. But Berry makes it clear that he isn't trying to diminish what happened to the millions who died by Hitler's hand (at least not on purpose). The book, in fact, is dedicated to "all those who were sacrificed in the Holocaust." But the project does raise the question, what's the point of all this? Is vegetarianism really undermined if it's true that Hitler abstained from meat?

Daniel Goldhagen, a Harvard political scientist and author of *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, a look at how a number of ordinary Germans eagerly assisted in Hitler's genocidal terror, has been a vegetarian since he was 10. Yet despite his intimate understanding of both vegetarianism and Hitler, he doesn't see a connection. "Hitler liked his followers to wear black clothes. Just because I like to wear black doesn't lump me in with him." Unsurprisingly, Goldhagen finds the whole topic off base. "The reason we are interested in this time period is not because of Hitler's diet," he says. In addition, other than Berry, none of the vegetarian activists I spoke to could recall a specific example of being taunted with the "Hitler was a vegetarian" line.

But maybe Berry is saying something else, something that has less to do with Hitler, and more to do with the lax state of the vegetarian movement today. After all, what vegetarian doesn't cheat?

It's not much of a challenge to prove that even the most devout herbivores fall off the fruit cart every once in a while. One vegetarian friend stopped by a deli a few years ago for a ham and cheese sandwich. She hadn't eaten meat in 10 years and hasn't since. Another vegetarian buddy in Los Angeles eats the chicken broth from wonton soup, but not the meat-filled dumplings. I even got her to eat a hot dog once. Still, she considers herself a vegetarian.

Like Hitler, many vegetarians cheat on their diet. Does this make them like Hitler? Of course not. It only makes their crappy vegetarians—at least according to Rynn Berry.

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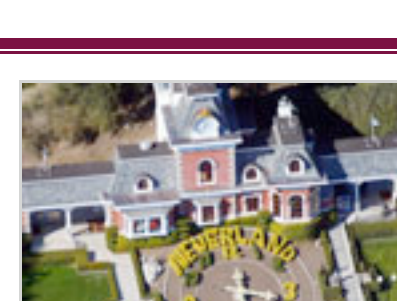
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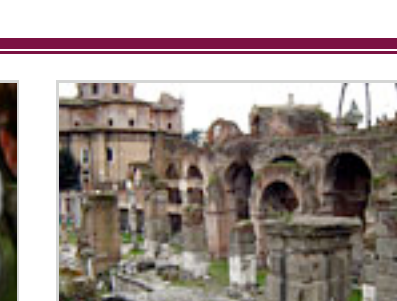
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