



AMERICA ON THE WORLD STAGE

ALBEMARLE | CHARLOTTESVILLE | GREENE | MADISON | ORANGE

A
TEACHING
AMERICAN
HISTORY
GRANT PROGRAM

PROJECT TITLE:

Hitler's rise to Power

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GRADE LEVEL & SUBJECT

Grades 6-8

United States History 1865-Present

SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

- 1. Primary Investigative Question(s)** – How was Adolf Hitler able to rise to power and gain German support that would defend his Nazi ideology, at the expense of millions?

Contextual Essay

Germany's citizens rallied and defended Adolf Hitler faithfully and obediently down a road that would lead to mass genocide and atrocities beyond human comprehension. Arguably considered the most evil and hated culture in history for its crimes against humanity in World War II, it is impossible for one to fathom a cause for such open and relentless brutality. The hard question is how seemingly rational human beings who can be characterized as hard-working, family-oriented, Christian citizens reconcile their involvement in worldwide devastation, terror, and mass genocide of millions. It is believed that the Nazi party was able to rise largely from its success in organizing economic programs that would aid the millions of unemployed and starving Germans as a result of the Great Depression (Brunstein). In 1925, there were only as mere 27,000 members of the Nazi party; however that would increase to nearly 2 million by 1933. By the time Hitler began his invasions, the party was at a shockingly high of 5.3 million. By war's end, it would reach its peak of 8 million (Burnstein). In order to gain perspective, one must examine the harsh reparations of the Treaty of Versailles, the economic pitfall of the Great Depression, and the personality traits of Adolf Hitler.

Treaty of Versailles

The aftermath of World War 1 was the perfect setting for Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party to rise to power. The German people were experiencing economic debilitation. Out of the ashes rose a man who promised the long beaten down Germans peace at last by offering solutions to the economic crisis and restoring national pride. Memoirs from the German author, Sebastian Haffner give us a firsthand look into Germany's situation: "The psychological and political roots of Nazism reach further back...Nations cannot go through such experiences without spiritual damage" (Haffner, pp.52-53).

The northeastern part of Europe reduced to rubble in World War 1. The blame and responsibility was largely put on Germany. Section 1- Articles 231 and 235 (of what?) deal with the guilt and reparations to be paid (by who, to who?): "The Allied and Associated Governments affirm and Germany accepts the

responsibility for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany.” Germany shall pay in such installments and in such manner the equivalent of 20,000,000,000 gold marks” Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, Austrian socio-political theorist states, “There is no better way to generate hatred than by forcing a person to sign a confession of guilt which he is sacredly convinced is untrue. The wanton humiliation, created the thirst for revenge which the National Socialists so cleverly exploited” (Buchanan, pg 76).

Winston Churchill explained it as follows, “The economic clauses of the Treaty were malignant and silly to an extent that made them obviously futile. Germany was condemned to pay reparations on a fabulous scale. The triumphant Allies continued to assert that they would squeeze Germany till the pipes squeaked. All this had a potent bearing on the prosperity of the worked and the mood of the German race” (Churchill, pg 9). As the treaty was being written, anger over the mass destruction in Europe and millions of death was boiling over. The treaty would deprive Germany of several lands (some seven million people were affected?) and all of its land overseas, the third largest on Earth. “Territories cut away, colonies gone; Germany was to have her limbs broken so she could never fight again” (Buchanan p.74). Sections I through XIV (of what?) specifically deal with political boundaries. Such lands discussed were either returned to rightful country or had to be acknowledged as independent of Germany. These included, Belgium, Luxemburg, Left Bank of the Rhine, Saar Basin coal mines, Alsace- Lorraine, Czech-Slovak state, Poland, Russia and all Russian states. Germany was also forbidden to reunite with Austria.

However, there are those who argue that the terms of the treaty were not as harsh as Germans perhaps were led to believe. In fact, it could be stated that the terms were advantageous to Germany and allowed Germany to remain a world power. Germany as defined by the treaty would have the largest population of any country in Europe other than Russia (Weinberg p. 14). The loss of Poland may have seemed detrimental to Germany, but an independent Poland would be a buffer between Germany and Russia, which was helpful as it was separated from that central power by another state. Not to mention that Poland would have been a weak addition,. What may have tied Germany down in the eastern part, would also tie down Russia, Germany’s worst enemy. This would also be evident when looking at the redrawing of the map of Southeast Europe, that Germany would now face newer, weaker countries, like Romania, rather than the ever growing and dangerous Russian empire (Weinberg p16). Germany was allowed to survive as a state as strong, and perhaps stronger than she was before the war due to the new weak states in Eastern Europe.(19?) Other important factors to be noted are Germanys industrial facilities were less damaged than other allied powers, leaving her the power to enlarge her population and skills. Germany continued to have her industrial, technical, and population sources flourish, allowing her to come out of defeat as a major player in world politics (Weinberg p22).

Great Depression

Another factor that contributed to Germany’s desperate state was the Stock Market Crash of 1929, paving the way to the Great Depression. Most of the world’s financial markets were affected. Germany took a huge hit as most of the economy relied on foreign funds and trade. Many countries crippled Germany by calling in their loans. Unemployment rates rose to 2,300,000 in the winter of 1930 (Churchill p.61) Winston Churchill noted in his first volume of his World War II series,“ The US banks, who were facing own economic crisis, refused to increase their improvident loans to Germany. This reaction led to the widespread closing of factories and the sudden ruin of many enterprises on which the peaceful revival of Germany was based” (Churchill pg 61). Inflation rates were rising at a rapid pace. Churchill went on to explain that, “In the final stages of inflation the mark stood at forty-three million millions to the pound sterling. The social and economic consequences of this inflation were deadly and far-reaching” (Churchill pg 12). People were desperate and tired of the suffering. All nations went through Great War; most have

experienced revolutions, social crisis, strikes, redistribution of wealth, and currency devaluation. None but Germany has undergone the grotesque extreme which not only money but all standards lost their value" (Haffner pp 52-53).

Adolf Hitler

Physician and psychologist Evilyn Linder describes Hitler as "a master in displaying emotions, his repertoire ranged from heroic pathos to passionate tears. At his mass gatherings he employed means that later became the trademark of pop-stars. He was not just a distant authority exercising patrician self-control; in his intense emotionality he was 'one of the Volk.' By being like them and yet at the same time at the top, he lifted them up with him. Men and women who were used to occupying a humiliatingly lowly place in German society suddenly found themselves at the summit of history alongside him" (Linder).

The following excerpt from a speech by Robert Ley, a politician in the Nazi Party, illustrates the profound German belief in Hitler's abilities and the power of his words, "*It was all due to the faith of one man! Yes, you who called us godless, we found our faith in Adolf Hitler, and through him found God once again. That is the greatness of our day, that is our good fortune!*" (Ley).

Albert Speer, German architect, Minister of Armaments and War Production for the Third Reich. "*All my feelings still existed side by side: attachment, rebellion, loyalty, outrage. I could never have confronted Hitler pistol in hand. Face to face, his magnetic power over me was too great up to the very last day.*" (Speer Pg 43)

Hitler was able to be so successful in gaining support as he also played on time-honored cultural German traditions. His army was made up of two ideologically defined groups of soldiers (Tubach). There were those who did believe in the Nazi school of thought, but the majority were patriots. Many Germans were led to believe they had been forced to defend themselves against an unprovoked attack by Poland, and not the other way around. Hitler used propaganda to bring out the nationalistic pride of its citizens to feel obligated to defend their country. (Tubach)

There were many in Germany, however, who did not favor Hitler; in fact these citizens would conspire against him as the war continued. People high in the German government, such as Carl Groedeler, mayor of Leipzig, Helmuth Stieff, chief of Organization for German army would quit the party and proclaim their disgust with Hitler and the atrocities that were occurring. Ludwig Beck, chief of staff of German army, saw what was happening early on and became alarmed, trying to warn others of Hitler's real intentions. He would drop the party as well, and work on taking the German people a different direction. There were many others, Julius Leber, a labor leader, and Ulrich von Hassel, professional diplomat, both of whom grew very alarmed at Hitler's dangerous foreign policy. Their efforts to out Hitler's intentions were stopped by the Nazi party, though they worked secretly behind the scenes for years and would become influential in post world war years (Weinberg pp 246-248).

America's Response

President Franklin Roosevelt did not merely sit and watch as Europe propelled itself into another world wide crisis. He saw what was happening in Europe, and it was clear that much was happening in the way of crisis mode in the United States as well. There was the downturn in the economy, causing huge suffering. America was in the middle of a depression within a depression and with isolationism ideals on the rise, and the president did not underestimate the country's distaste to be involved in foreign affairs (Fischer, p. 86). Roosevelt did encourage efforts to revise Neutrality Act of 1937, which would repeal the arms embargo. He addressed congress several times making references to European aggressors and what Americas response would have to be if it continued. He would address Hitler himself, discussing guarantees that Hitler would not attack certain neutral countries. When he found Hitler to be a man not of his word, to say the least, he knew his task would be tough but needed. He has to get an isolationist-minded America to be convinced that Germany was not just a threat to European powers, but to America as well. As Hitler began to capture more and more of Europe, FDR began publicly addressing the people. In 1940, he would address the graduating class at the University of Virginia, sounding anything but isolationist. He states that America could no longer afford to be a lone island surrounded by a world dominated by force. He went on to say that America's sympathies must lie with nations that were giving their life to fight those guided by force. He told the class that with France taken, if Britain fell, there would be nothing to protect them from Germany. He left his listeners and the world with the message that the day was coming near, and to be prepared. (Fischer p. 121)

Conclusion

World War II cannot be considered just another war. The entire world was forced to intervene in the name of human morality. "Its destructiveness, its disruption of legal and social order, was on a scale so disordinate that it cannot be viewed as a war among others; its opposition of ideologies, democratic verse totalitarian, nonetheless stark because democracy perforce allied itself with one form of totalitarianism in the struggle against another" (Keegan pg 52). Franklin D. Roosevelt was undoubtly at one with Winston Churchill in detesting the principles, or lack of principle, on which Nazism was founded. Nevertheless it will take Pearl Harbor to fully engage the United States (Keegan pg 55).

What could be seen as a perfect storm of colossal events would leave Germany susceptible to Hitler's reign of terror. Were they not facing such extreme and desperate times, would he have been so successful in convincing them he was their future? The harshness of the Treaty of Versailles after World War 1, coupled with the Great Depressions final blow on the economy left Germany destitute and hopeless. Hitler's charismatic personality paired with Germany's desperate situation shows a possibility as to why rational citizens would carry out his plans.

Annotated Bibliography

The Great War: Evaluating the Treaty of Versailles (April 17, 1923) Adolph Hitler Retrieved from

<http://edsitement.neh.gov/sites/default/files/worksheets/Hitlerspeech.pdf>

This letter is a Primary Source. Sent from Adolph Hitler to express his concern over the harshness of the Treaty of Versailles. I used to express his contempt early on before war and to compare to his letter sent in 1939 prior to war.

Communication from the German Government to the British Government, Handed by Joachim von Ribbentrop, Minister for Foreign Affairs, to the British Ambassador (Sir Neville Henderson) at 11:20 A.M., September 3, 1939 Retrieved from

<http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/gp3.asp>

Primary Source letter from Hitler to Great Britain. Used this letter to the British Government to discuss issues between the two countries. Used to explain why Hitler was angry over Versailles Treaty and treatment of Germany.

Marks, Stephan (2007), Chapter 3. Why Did They Follow Hitler? The Psychology of National Socialism

This is a primary source. It is a letter from a child who was part of the Hitler Youth. He is explaining why he followed Hitler, as well as others.

Speer, Albert (1970), Inside the Third Reich, Memoirs by Albert Speer. New York: The Macmillan Company.

This book gives firsthand accounts from a man who stated at the Nuremberg trial that if Hitler ever had a friend, he would be it. Albert Speer was a German architect part of World War II. He was given title of Minister of Armaments and War Production for the Third Reich. He was Adolf Hitler's chief architect. He gives direct insight into Hitler's personal and political life, allowing us to understand why he and other NAZI soldiers followed Hitler.

Haffner, Sebastian (2000), Defying Hitler, A Memoir. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

This book is a translation of a manuscript of the memoirs of the German author Sebastian Haffner, found after his death. It offers his perspective on the rise of Hitler and his growing influences of the Nazi philosophy. Haffner specifically alludes to how ordinary, well educated people grappled with the ever changing Germany post World War 1.

Churchill, Winston (1948). *The Gathering Storm, The Second World War*. Houghton Mifflin Company.

By far the most interesting of all sources, this book is the first volume of Churchill's autobiographical six-volume history of the war, dealing with the period from 1919 to 1940. Taken from the controversial, Prime Minister's personal minutes", Churchill writes about his accounts in the days leading to war. He wrote several letters during office so he could use them later as a historian. He talks about how the Treaty of Versailles, the Great Depression, and Hitler himself impacted Germany from firsthand accounts.

Keegan, John. (1995), *The Battle for History- Refighting World War 11*. New York: First Vintage Books.

This book examines the overview of the cause of World War 11. It looks at the Allied powers roles in the war, and why so many did indeed eventually intervene. He looks at the controversies that have surrounded the world war for ages.

Buchanan, Patrick (2008). *Churchill, Hitler, and the Unnecessary War*. New York: Crown Publishers.

This book offers a different, perhaps controversial look at World War 11 and how it may have been avoided. I used it to look at what he stated historians believed about the Treaty of Versailles leaving Germany bitter and receptive to Hitler. Delves into at the 30 years between the wars.

**The Peace Treaty of Versailles Article 231: The War Guilt Clause(1919)
Retrieved from <http://net.lib.byu.edu/~rdh7/wwi/versa/versa7.html>**

This primary source document is the document that dealt with the reparations and lands taken back from Germany as a result of World War 1. It has each article and section outlined. I used this source to get 100% factual information concerning what Germany agreed to and signed to end World War 1.

Lindner M. D, Evelin Gerda. (2000, December [Vol.5. no.1](#)) Were Ordinary Germans Hitler's 'Willing Executioners'? Or Were They Victims of Humiliating Seduction and Abandonment? Retrieved from <http://www.ideajournal.com/articles.php?id=31>

This article discusses the personality traits of Hitler. It focuses on how he intended to sway the masses, and even outlined such in his book. It also refers to the loss Germany was feeling at time, and why it was susceptible to his cultish personality.

Robert Ley, Fate- I believe (1937 Munich: pp. 103-114) Retrieved from <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/ley2.htm>

Robert Ley served as Reich Organization Leader, and was responsible for educating the party of Nazi ideals. I used quotes from his speech to explain how Nazi influence, at the hands of Hitler's henchmen, was able to build a Hitler a God who is always right. Part of deconstructing Hitler's hold on Germans.