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| Hitler, Adolf (1889-1945) |
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| Adolf Hitler was the dominant political figure in German Nazism. He became chairman of the NSDAP (the *Nazionalsocialistische Deutsche Arbeitpartei*, or National Socialist German Worker’s Party) in 1921, and was appointed chancellor of Germany in 1933. Between 1934 and 1945, he ruled as *Führer* (leader, but in this case absolute dictator). Hitler guided Germany to rearmament in the 1930s, and triggered the Second World War with the invasion of Poland in 1939. He inspired a quest for German ‘racial purity,’ and elevated anti-Semitism and xenophobia from a cultural prejudice to an all-encompassing state policy of genocide. |
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Anti-Semitism and dissatisfaction with the polyglot nature of the Austrian (Hapsburg) Empire were common in Vienna prior the First World War (Hitler was suspicious even of Austrian Roman Catholics, though his mother had been one). In *Mein Kampf* [*My Struggle*](1925-26), his most influential piece of writing, Hitler articulates his desire to restore German honour through political means after the shame and humiliation of defeat in the First World War. Written during a year of imprisonment after the failed Beer Hall Putsch in Munich (the failed coup lead by Hitler to overthrow the government of Bavaria), *Mein Kampf* attempts to unite theories on the superiority of the Nordic races, as outlined by Alfred Rosenberg in *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (1930), with the anti-capitalist views of Gottfried Feder (an early drafter of the NSDAP program), who supported the abolition of interest on capital. In the foreground of this Nordic racial chauvinism and the economic populism of those around Hitler was a distinct prejudice against Jews, which historically rose and fell throughout Germany and Europe. *Mein Kampf* outlines a historical pattern in which the Jews deceive the nobler European peoples into believing in human equality and democratic government, and then promote Marxism as the highest stage of their moral coup (a narrative pattern very similar to elements of Friedrich Nietzsche’s works, though there is no evidence of Hitler having read Nietzsche at this time.) Ultimately, Feder’s populism was subordinated to Nazi theories of race. Rosenberg, the leading figure on racial theory in Hitler’s circle, drew upon two important ‘scientists’ of race. First, there was the British-born anti-Darwinian botanist and vitalist Houston Stewart Chamberlain — son-in-law of Richard Wagner, ardent follower of Nietzsche, and author of *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899). Second, there was the American lawyer, eugenicist, and anti-miscegenist Madison Grant, author of *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), a book about racial hygiene, and perhaps the earliest articulation of the threat posed by modernity and by ‘inferior’ races such as Slavs, Africans, Asians, and Jews to Nordic culture. Chamberlain’s work was widely admired in Germany prior to the First World War. Hitler himself met with Chamberlain both before and after his imprisonment, and had high regard for his ideas, and Grant’s work is considered a rough model for *Mein Kampf.*  The ignominy of Germany’s battlefield capitulation in the First World War, along with the debilitating reparations, territorial losses, and industrial expropriations compelled by the allied powers at Versailles in 1918 and, later, the wholesale economic collapse of Germany in the Weimar years could only be explained, Hitler felt, by a deception on the home front led by Marxist Jews: ‘In those long years there was only one who kept up an imperturbable, unflagging fight, and this was the *Jew.* His Star of David rose higher and higher in proportion as our people’s will for self-preservation vanished’ (Hitler 329). Hitler’s solution — ‘a national organism: *A German State of the German Nation*’ (329; Hitler’s italics) — could not be fully realised without an irrendentist campaign to re-unite all Nordic (Germanic) peoples, including those in Austria, Western Poland, the Sudetenland, Alsace-Lorraine, and Scandinavia, many of whose territories had been lost in the First World War. Equally important to Hitler was the idea that Germany severely lacked *Lebensraum* [living space], the increase of which would allow the natural development and growth of a superior people. Rosenberg was also interested in increased *Lebensraum,* but the idea arose earlier, when Hitler was in his teens. Friedrich Ratzel published ‘Lebensraum’ in 1901, an essay that popularised the term as part of his science of ‘biogeography,’ derived from Ernst Heinrich Haekel’s Darwinism. The geographer and First World War general Karl Haushofer promulgated the idea that the putatively high population density of German cities could be relieved by colonial expansion. Hitler’s writings, however, contributed little to this nativist and nationalistic intellectual ferment — *Mein Kampf* sold poorly until his rise to power, at which point it became a nation-wide wedding gift to newly married couples. Its influence and worst consequence, however, resulted in the brutally efficient ‘final solution’ to the Jewish ‘problem’ that eventually murdered via starvation, medical experimentation, firing squads, hangings, and gas chambers, an estimated 5.5 million Jews, along with masses of Roma (gypsies), homosexuals, and those with developmental disabilities. Hitler proved a less capable military strategist than an orator and fanatically admired populist leader, one who led Germany out of severe economic collapse only to plunge it headlong into military, economic, and moral ruin. |
| Further reading:  (Hitler)  (Madden) |