Hitler, Adolf (1889-1945)

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 1933. Between 1934 and 1945, he ruled as *Führer* (leader, but in this case also absolute dictator). Hitler guided Germany to rearmament in the 1930s and triggered WWII with the invasion of Poland in 1939. He also 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. Born in Brunau am Inn, Austro-Hungary, he worked briefly as an artist in Vienna before enlisting in the German army in WWI. Hitler assumed German citizenship only years later. Though anti-Semitism and dissatisfaction with the polyglot nature of the Austrian (Hapsburg) Empire were common in Vienna before WWI—Hitler was suspicious even of Austrian Roman Catholics, though his beloved mother had been one—it is clear from *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle,* 1925-26), his most influential piece of writing, that the primary desire motivating him as a political figure was the restoration of German honor after the shame and humiliation of defeat in WWI. Written during a year of imprisonment after the failed Beer Hall Putsch in Munich, in which Hitler tried and failed to overthrow the government of Bavaria, *Mein Kampf* follows a logic that attempts to unite theories about the superiority of the Nordic races elaborated at length by Alfred Rosenberg in *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (1930) with the anti-capitalist views of Gottfried Feder, one of the drafters of the early NSDAP program, who supported the abolition of interest on capital. But behind both the Nordic racial chauvinism and the economic populism of those around Hitler lay prejudice against Jews, which waxed and waned throughout German (and European) history. *Mein Kampf* outlines a historical pattern in which the Jews (making use of Christianity as well) trick the nobler European peoples into accepting belief in human equality and democratic government, and then promulgate Marxism as the highest stage of their moral coup. (The pattern is very similar to what can be found in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, though there is no evidence Hitler had actually read Nietzsche’s work at this time.) In the end, Feder’s populism was subordinated to Nazi theories of race. Rosenberg, the leading light 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 *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899, in German). 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” that was perhaps the most important early articulation of the threat posed by modernity (and by “inferior” races such as Slavs, Africans, Asians, and especially Jews) to Nordic culture, which was for Grant the chief motor of European and American civilization. Chamberlain’s work was widely admired in Germany before WWI. Hitler himself met with Chamberlain both before and after his imprisonment, and had high regard for his ideas. Grant’s work in particular seems to have been a model of sorts for *Mein Kampf.*

The ignominy of Germany’s battlefield capitulation in WWI, 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 “stab-in-the-back” 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’s solution—“a national organism: A German State of the German Nation”—could then not be fully realized without an irrendentist campaign to re-unite all the Nordic (Germanic) peoples, including those in Austria, Western Poland, the Sudetenland, Alsace-Lorraine, and Scandinavia, many of which territories had been lost in WWI. Just as important to Hitler was the idea that what Germany lacked most of all was *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 popularized the term as part of his science of “biogeography,” derived from Ernst Heinrich Haekel’s Darwinism. And the geographer and WWI general Karl Haushofer promulgated the idea that the putatively high population density of German cities could be relieved by colonial expansion. In the end, Hitler’s writings contributed little to this nativist and nationalistic intellectual ferment—*Mein Kampf* sold very badly until Hitler rose to power, at which point it became a wedding gift—other than what was undoubtedly its worst consequence: a brutally efficient “final solution” to the Jewish problem that eventually murdered, via starvation, medical experiment, firing squad, hanging, and gas chambers, an estimated 5.5 million Jews, who were accompanied to their mass graves by lesser numbers of Roma (gypsies), homosexuals, and the mentally defective. Hitler fortunately proved a less capable military strategist than a mesmerizing 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.

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