

Hitler Overview

(From History Review)



This is the best-known face of the last century. Its appearance on the cover of a book or magazine is known to increase sales by 25-50%. The political career of Adolf Hitler is the most fully documented this century, and more has been written about him than anyone else in history - with the possible exception of Jesus Christ. He provokes endless, sometimes barmy, Internet questions and comments. Over 1000 biographies have been published. Yet after 50 years of historical debate the phenomenon of Hitler still amazes.

Alan Bullock points out that he began with no advantages (though not as humbly as he liked to claim), not even a citizen of the country he was to rule. Entirely reliant on his own resources, he came to wield in Germany an absolute power unequalled in a modern industrialised state. His domination of Europe, comparable to Napoleon's at his height, was broken only by the combined efforts of the three most powerful nations in the world. How did he do it? Not through hard graft, as he was in some ways lazy, often bored by his administrative duties. Bullock draws attention to his mastery of the irrational in politics, gift for simplification, sense of timing, opportunism, strength of purpose in pursuing his aims, unshakable belief in himself as a man chosen by destiny. His main qualification for politics was arguably his staggering gifts as an orator - "a mass psychologist of really diabolical genius". (Schacht).

Adolf Hitler poses unique problems for historians. "The Nazi period in German history is an object of academic historical enquiry and detailed scholarly research. It is also a live and painful issue for thousands of Germans and other Europeans, the explanation of why they have no relatives or children." (Michael Burleigh (ed.), *Confronting the Nazi Past*, Collins & Brown 1996). For many Germans, 1933-45 is a black hole in their history, which somehow has to be reinvented. Twinned with this problem is the puzzle of Hitler's personal responsibility for two of the greatest catastrophes in world history - World War Two and the Holocaust. He is the supreme example of the debate about the historical role of 'great' individuals - whether the Hitlers and Napoleons bend social, economic and demographic forces to their will or are their prisoner.

Both these dilemmas are addressed in A J P Taylor's *Origins of the Second World War* (1961), which is the start of modern revisionism. Little can be discovered so long as we go on attributing everything that happened to Hitler. He supplied a powerful dynamic element, but it was fuel to an existing engine. He was in part the creation of Versailles, in part the creation of ideas that were common in contemporary Europe. Most of all, he was the creation of German history and of the German present. He would have counted for nothing without the support and cooperation of the German people. He gave orders, which Germans executed, of a wickedness without parallel in civilized history. His foreign policy was a different matter. He aimed to make

Germany the dominant Power in Europe and maybe, more remotely, in the world. Others have pursued similar aims, and still do. Other Powers treat smaller countries as their satellites. Other Powers defend their vital interests by force of arms. In international affairs there was nothing wrong with Hitler except that he was a German.

It is remarkable how much of the current historical agenda is here. Taylor encompasses the issues of whether he was product or creator of the times he lived in, whether he worked to a monstrous blueprint in foreign policy or instinctively followed more normal paths of national self-interest, even the complicity of the German people - the subject of Goldhagen's recent and controversial *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996).

TASKS

1. What does this article reveal about Adolf Hitler? Highlight or jot down what it tells you about him.
2. Write down 4 or 5 questions you have as a result of reading this. What do you want to know more about? What intrigues or interests you?
3. Note down any new or important words, or any terms you don't understand.

CONSIDER: Why is it important to study the rise of Hitler and his role in History?