

Adolf Hitler

A disaster for the German nation

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Hitler didn't just bring disaster to his countrymen; he wrecked the lives of Germans outside Germany too.

Key concept

Consequences

Before you read this

Get a modern map of Germany and a map of Germany from before 1945. You will need to compare them, and have them to hand as you read this.



TOP PHOTO

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804): German philosopher of the eighteenth century Enlightenment. He argued that human understanding includes a number of general propositions not drawn from experience but which nevertheless help the mind to make sense of experience.

Comparing a modern map of Germany with some of its predecessors will show how much it has shrunk in size since the days of Bismarck in the nineteenth century and again since the fall of the Third Reich. In terms of the influence of its thinkers and writers too, Germany has declined since 1945. This article examines the extent of the former German states and the development of German communities in central and eastern Europe outside the borders of the German Reich. Finally, it assesses who was principally responsible for Germany's decline and what effect this has had on the international situation since 1945.

The geographical extent of Germany before 1945

The eighteenth-century philosopher **Immanuel Kant** was well known for his regular habits. Every afternoon at the same time, he would walk around the city of Königsberg, thinking about philosophical problems. The environment must have been stimulating because eventually he came up with two terrifically influential pieces of work. The *Critique of Pure Reason* came out in 1781 when Kant was almost 60. It is still regarded as a groundbreaking attempt to dissect the rational capacities of the mind. Perhaps more famous still, however, was his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. It appeared 4 years later and contained well-known ethical rules such as, 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.'

In his formula of humanity, Kant also taught that you should only treat people as ends in themselves, never just as means to the attainment of other goals, such as your own satisfaction. This

philosopher died 200 years ago, in 1804, but his ideas remain influential. Intellectual history, philosophy, perhaps even the world in which we live, would not be quite the same without this towering German intellect.

The strange thing is that today there is no such place as Königsberg — it is called Kaliningrad. In Kant's day, the city was an important part of east Prussia. However, it was taken over by the Red Army at the end of the Second World War and absorbed into the USSR. Although now cut off from 'Mother Russia' by Lithuania, it remains located in an enclave which looks towards Moscow rather than either Berlin or Brussels. In fact, if you look at a contemporary world political atlas, it is hard to guess that there ever was a region called East Prussia. Today it is divided between Russia, Lithuania and Poland.

East Prussia is not unique. Parts of west Prussia, Pomerania and Silesia were all taken away from Germany after the First World War and given to Poland. The Polish port of Gdansk on the Baltic coast used to be the German city of Danzig, Bydgoszcz used to be Bromberg, Poznan was Posen and Wroclaw was Breslau. This truncation of Germany was intensified after 1945, when the Red Army swept through to Berlin and beyond.

The German diaspora

But this is far from the full story of the shrinking of the German nation. British readers may know that some German communities have lived for many years on what is today French territory — Alsace-Lorraine. Less commonly known is the fact that German communities have been found much further afield than this. There used to be important German groups living in Estonia and Latvia. When these countries were part of the Russian empire before the First World War, Germans actually ran the Baltic provinces on behalf of the tsar. The eighteenth-century tsarina, Catherine the Great, herself a German princess, advertised back in 1763 for Germans to colonise her empire's insecure borderlands. In exchange for land, they were expected to turn inhospitable areas like the Volga valley into an agricultural paradise, while fighting off irate Kirghiz warriors. Leaving a Germany wracked by war, 27,000 German settlers took up her offer. Forty years later, Alexander I launched another settlement drive, encouraging Germans to move to parts of the Ukraine, Bessarabia, the Crimea and the Transcaucasus.

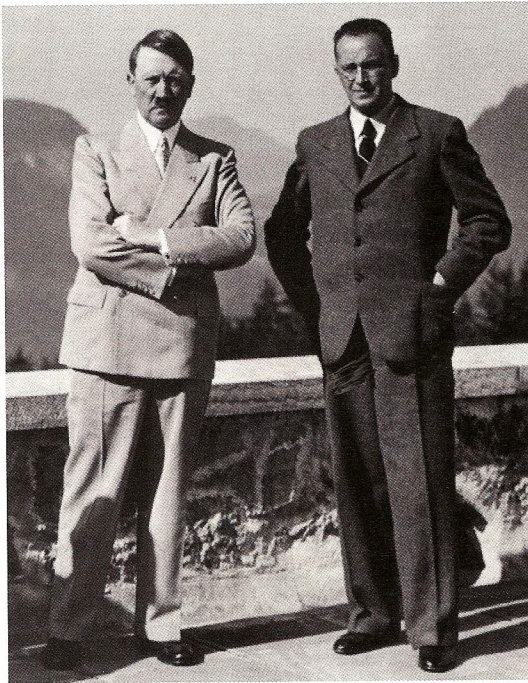
This eastward movement of Germans found parallels further south in the lands of the Austrian empire. Some Saxons were encouraged to migrate by a twelfth-century Hungarian monarch in order to secure the region against invasions by Tartars and Mongols. More Germans were brought to the lands by the eighteenth century rulers, Maria-Theresa and Joseph II. Ethnic Germans were drawn to zones as diverse as Bohemia and Galicia



(in the modern-day Czech Republic and southern Poland) and, in the south, Banat, Siebenbürgen, Batschka and Swabian Turkey (in modern-day Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Croatia).

The Paris Peace Settlements and truncation of Germany from 1919

Whether you look at the history of the German, Russian or Habsburg empires, for a long time there



Adolf Hitler with Konrad Henlein, founder of the Sudeten Deutsche Partei (SDP).

successor states: the central and eastern European states which succeeded to the Austro-Hungarian empire after 1918.

irredentists: those who want the reunification in one nation state of all lands populated by their people but separated from the motherland.

Konrad Henlein (1898–1945): leader of the Sudeten Germans during the build-up to the Sudetenland crisis of 1938. He continued to control the region under Nazi rule.

were German settlements lying in eastern Europe well beyond what most Anglo-Saxons regard as ‘traditionally German lands’. These German communities survived well into the twentieth century, still living in territories which the 1919 peace settlement took from Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia to form the Baltic states and the **successor states** of

Key points

- German settlements and German culture were widely spread around Europe before the advent of Hitler.
- Consequently, German culture flourished throughout Europe, with many famous German philosophers, writers and musicians living and working far beyond the borders of what is nowadays recognised as modern Germany.
- Hitler’s use of ethnic German minorities to pursue his political and military objectives fostered a sense of distrust of Germans which lasted long after the Second World War.
- Despite his ardent hatred and mistrust of communism and the USSR, it was Hitler’s war that brought half of Germany and most of eastern Europe under Soviet control.
- Most of the contraction of German cultural influence and lack of recognition of its former extent can be attributed to Hitler’s obsession with extending the rule of the German *Volk*.

Questions

- Germany’s wartime aggression against Poland might explain postwar Poland’s acquisition of German territory, but does it justify it?
- Should the descendants of Germans who left Germany to live in eastern Europe in the eighteenth century still have been considered as belonging to Germany in the twentieth century?
- Is it fair to say that nationalism was stronger among Germans outside the Reich than among those within it?

Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia. It was commonly reported in the 1920s that 8 million ethnic Germans were left beyond the borders of the Weimar Republic, many of them in ‘the east’. How would they respond to living within the new borders?

Of course, during the interwar period, some of these ex-patriate Germans were **irredentists**: they desperately wanted incorporation into Germany, whatever the cost to the state in which they lived, revising the borders established by the Treaty of Versailles. **Konrad Henlein**, for example, an ethnic German politician and leader of the Nazi party in the German-speaking Sudetenland region of western Czechoslovakia, favoured an irredentist solution to the Sudeten problem.

What did Hitler ‘do for the Germans’?

In the end Henlein and his followers became useful to the German National Socialists. They helped Hitler to destabilise Czechoslovakia and so played a part in precipitating Germany’s march into the Sudetenland in October 1938. Henlein and his crew were well positioned to press for the region’s incorporation into Germany. One of the pillars of the postwar peace settlement had been to grant self-determination to Europe’s nationalities, and this is what Henlein demanded. Nevertheless, of greater practical importance was the fact that the Sudetenland was directly adjacent to Germany’s borders and contained much Czech heavy industry.

Things looked rather different to German communities living further afield, like those in the new Latvian and Estonian states. In the 1920s, there seemed no chance that Germany’s borders might be extended along the Baltic coast almost as far as St Petersburg. Germans living here faced the choice between emigration or adaptation to their new states. Adaptation was not always accomplished happily, especially since the Latvian and Estonian governments seized traditional German agricultural estates and redistributed them to ethnic Latvians and Estonians. Even so, in these countries

interesting ethnic German figures began looking for a way to live harmoniously in their new conditions.

These characters included Paul Schiemann (the most liberal of them all, from Latvia), Ewald Ammende (a moderate German nationalist businessman from Estonia) and Werner Hasselblatt (the most nationalist of the three, also from Estonia). These men pressed the idea that Germans in the Baltic states should work loyally within their new countries to promote the common good. While doing this, however, they demanded the right for all minority national groups to be allowed to pursue their own cultural lives independent of state interference. Most importantly, this meant that ethnic Germans should be allowed to establish their own central cultural council and have schools where minority children would receive education in their 'mother tongue'. Such demands had historical precedents, since German settlers in the east had been promised similar kinds of rights by the monarchs encouraging their migration. But after the First World War, nothing could be taken for granted.

Latvia never passed full **cultural autonomy** legislation, just a law on schooling in 1918, but Estonia did in February 1925. It was implemented separately by the German and Jewish minorities. Interwar commentators, such as the Englishman C. A. Macartney, hailed this as a major success. It was believed that, by allowing national minorities to express their cultural differences freely, there would be fewer reasons for Europe to go to war in the future. Ewald Ammende in particular tried to internationalise the message by setting up the Congress for European Minorities in 1925, to represent not just ethnic Germans, but all national minorities in Europe.

Hitler, the post-1945 division of Germany and the Cold War

And here we hit on the truly disastrous nature of Hitler for the German nation. Ironically, since he was an ethnic German himself (being born in Austria rather than 'Germany proper'), he made it harder than ever for the far-flung German communities to survive in the long term.

■ First, his pursuit of irridentism with the Sudeten Germans made other states wary of the intentions of their German minorities.



Sudeten Germans form themselves into the 'Free Corps' in 1938 to further Nazi aims.

■ Then the Nazi–Soviet pact led him to encourage Baltic and other German communities to leave zones slated for Soviet control.

■ Last of all, his barbarous pursuit of the Second World War spelled not just disaster for German communities inside the USSR but, in the end, made it all but impossible for Germans and east Europeans to live together and cooperate as tolerant neighbours.

As the *Wehrmacht* retreated and the Red Army arrived, millions of ethnic Germans in the east fled their homes. A bleak future for Germans in eastern Europe was underlined at the **Potsdam Conference** in July 1945, when the Allies agreed that the

cultural autonomy: freedom granted to a minority population to maintain its own culture, language and traditions.

Potsdam Conference: Allied summit conference at the end of the Second World War which settled the postwar division of Germany and its border with Poland.

Weblink

There are a number of sites relating to ethnic Germans living outside the borders of Germany, but beware: some of them are put up by neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups with a tendency to blame the Germans' (very real) postwar misfortunes on the Jews. You can sample the angry account at: www.wintersonnenwende.com/scriptorium/english/archives/sginferno/sgi00.html, though you might find the tone distasteful. There is a useful list of where ethnic Germans in eastern Europe are to be found at: www.geocities.com/Athens/9479/deu1.html, and a useful short entry on ethnic Germans at www.history-of-the-holocaust.org/LIBARC/LEXICON/LexEntry/EthniGer.html. For Kaliningrad, see <http://studyrussian.com/kaliningrad/history.html>.

The Red Army marching through the streets of Cracow in 1945.



TOPPHOTO

Oder–Neisse line:

Polish–German border along the rivers Oder and Neisse agreed on by the Allied powers at the Potsdam conference. It entailed handing substantial areas of German territory over to Poland, from which the Polish government expelled 6 million Germans. The government of West Germany refused to accept the frontier until 1970, and appeared to challenge it again after the 1991 reunification of Germany.

Russians should administer east Prussia and that Germany’s eastern border should be contracted to the **Oder–Neisse line**. The Allies also endorsed the expulsion of Germans from the east. It was no surprise, therefore, that a flow of German refugees westward lasted until roughly 1947. Stalin’s troops also occupied the eastern half of what was left of Germany and, as a result, more German refugees than ever headed westwards — at least until the Berlin Wall went up in 1961.

Coupled with the extensive wartime destruction of housing across Germany, these developments turned the once-proud country into a nation of refugees. The traces are still there today. Groups which left eastern Europe maintain a sense of identity through organisations, or *Landsmannschaften*, recalling the areas which their families left between 1944 and 1947.

Hitler: a disaster for Germany

So this is why Hitler was a disaster for the German nation. His brutal hostility brought the USSR into the heart of Europe (leading to the occupation of half of Germany), lost east Prussia to Stalin and made it extremely difficult for German and non-German to live side by side.

In the process, Hitler also made it hard for Germans to remember that their predecessors in the east had tried to make positive contributions to the history of the area. The University of Tartu in Estonia was once the German-speaking University

of Dorpat. Not only did Kant live in what is now Kaliningrad, but his friend, the German poet Herder, taught at the cathedral school in Riga, now the capital of Latvia. In the end, Hitler made it much harder for Germans to identify with even the good things about their nation’s long-standing relationship with eastern Europe.

Dr Martyn Housden teaches criminology at the University of Bradford. His books include *Resistance and Conformity in the Third Reich* (1997), *Hitler: Study of a Revolutionary?* (2000) and *Hans Frank: Lebensraum and the Holocaust* (2003). Currently he is researching a biography of Ewald Ammende and completing *Lebensraum: A New Look at an Old Ideal* (with John Hiden).

Further reading

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