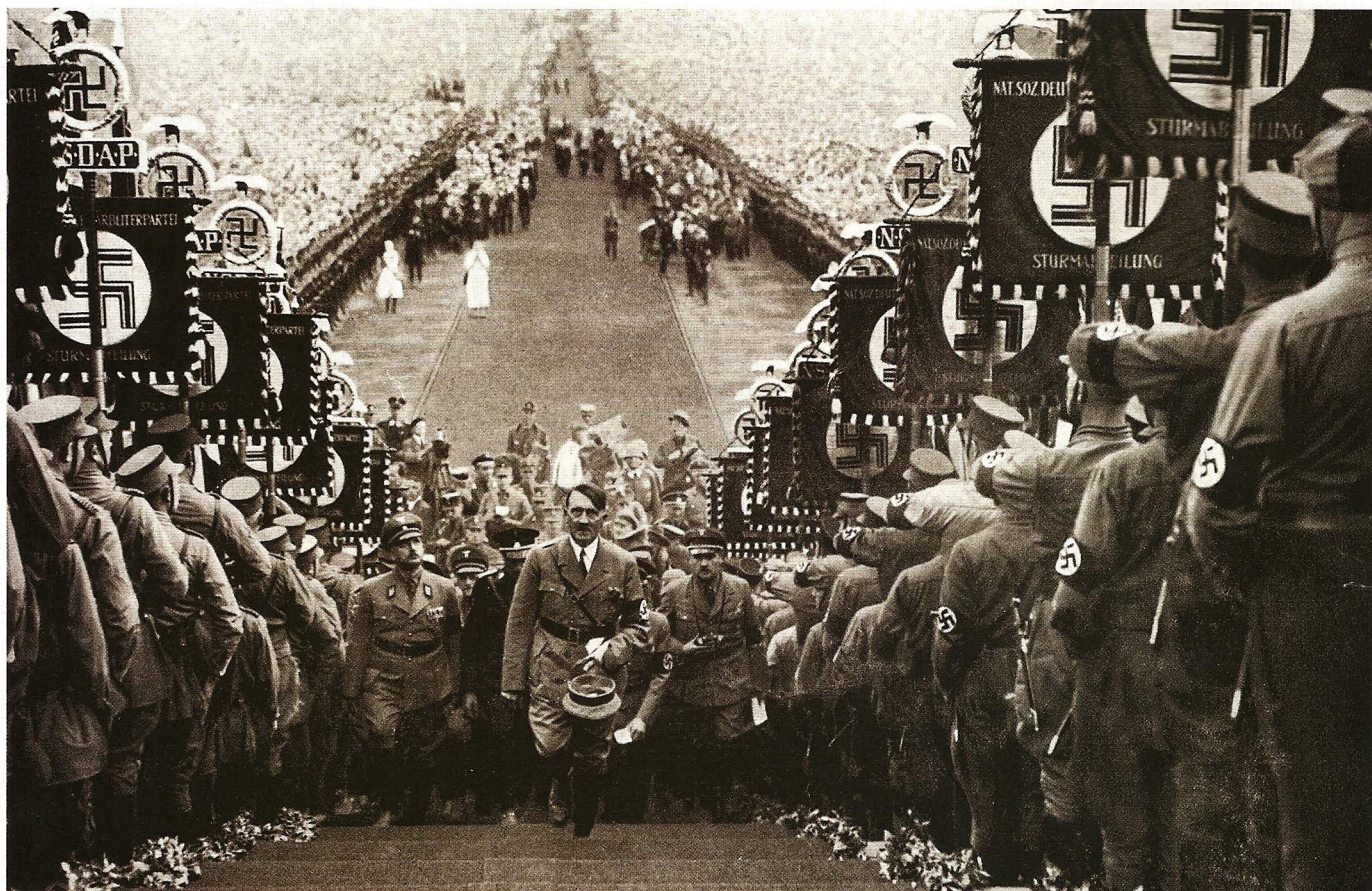


THE HISTORY ESSAY



Adolf Hitler mounts the steps at the Harvest Festival Rally at Bückeberg in 1934. Extraordinary demonstrations of power such as this were key in strengthening the growing personality cult surrounding the führer, says Ian Kershaw

THE LONG SHADOW OF ADOLF HITLER

The Nazi leader was not the only monster of the 20th century - so why, 125 years after his birth, does he fascinate us more than any other despot?

By Sir Ian Kershaw

PICTORIAL PRESS-ALAMY

Adolf Hitler occupies a unique place in history. One hundred and twenty five years after his birth in the small Austrian town of Braunau am Inn, on 20 April 1889, the Nazi leader continues to cast a long shadow over the world. Our enduring fascination with his personality far outstrips our

interest in any other dictator. But why? In a most obvious sense, the answer seems clear: Hitler was the chief author of the most devastating war, and the most terrible genocide, that the world has yet known. Certainly, that is reason enough to register his unparalleled impact on world history. It is also a good part of the reason why there have probably been more publications about Hitler than any other historical figure – apart, perhaps, from Jesus.

Hitler's primary responsibility for the colossal inhumanity of the Nazi regime warrants, of course, another question: what sort of individual could be capable of such unimaginable brutality? But we don't seem to be as concerned about answering this question when it comes to Stalin or Mao, both of whom were also responsible for the deaths of millions. Nor, in the case of Stalin or Mao, do we experience anything like the fascination that the minutiae of Hitler's character continue to exert.

This macabre fascination became more than evident to me from the flood of correspondence that followed the publication of the two volumes of my Hitler biography, in 1998 and 2000. Among the zanier missives I received, I was asked whether Hitler drank Tokaji wine at his wedding to Eva Braun, only hours before their joint suicide in 1945. Almost certainly he didn't – but what difference would it have made had he done so?

Another correspondent suggested that Hitler was descended from the British royal family, claiming that his ear measurements were (allegedly) identical to those of Prince John, the son of George V and Queen Mary. The canard about Hitler visiting Liverpool in 1912 (he didn't) still surfaces repeatedly, despite all efforts to put it to rest. And the drama in the Berlin bunker at the end has woven its own spell, unmatched by the interest in the circumstances of the death of any other modern despot.

Stalin's paranoid refusal to believe that Hitler was dead (though the Soviets had been presented with a piece of jawbone in a cigar box, which could be authenticated as Hitler's) invented mystery where none existed and prompted persistent rumours that Hitler and Eva Braun had somehow been spirited away at the

last to South America. I had numerous enquiries about the nature of Hitler's physical or mental illnesses, and various speculative diagnoses of these. The unstated implication was that if such an illness could be definitively established (it can't), that would be enough to explain world war and genocide; that, if Hitler could be shown to be mad, it would somehow account for the actions of the millions of sane individuals who were nonetheless anxious to put his ideas into practice.

If some of these examples are patently absurd, they serve to highlight the extremes of the continued fascination with Hitler. In part this reflects an adherence to the 'great man' approach to history, bestowing on Hitler a sort of 'negative greatness', as some interpreters have done. Of course, some individuals – and Hitler was certainly one of them – have played major personal roles in shaping history, whatever the circumstances and impersonal determinants that conditioned those roles. However, the enduring preoccupation with Hitler goes far beyond a conventional interest in historical figures of great power and influence.

This stems, in some measure, from our continued sense of astonishment at a story without close parallel in modern history. Here was an individual who, for the first 30 years of his life, was a complete unknown, without education, qualifications, training, military leadership or family connections. Yet in the subsequent 25 years before his death, this figure was able to gain supreme power in one of the most sophisticated, cultured nations on earth. He went on to plunge Europe and the world into a war that cost more than 50 million lives, to instigate a genocide that aimed to wipe out 11 million Jews for no other reason than their ethnicity, and then to take his own life with the enemy almost literally at his door, his country ruined and occupied by enemy forces and the European continent utterly devastated.

We look for answers in an individual personality commensurate with the enormity of his impact, his hold over much of the German population, the power he wielded, the destructiveness that he produced – but we fail to find them.



This rare still of Hitler and his mistress (later, wife) Eva Braun is from a private home movie made by Braun's sister Gretl in the early 1940s

THE HISTORY ESSAY

“Hitler isolated his private sphere from his public life – and in an era before prying 24/7 television news and social networks, he was able to sustain this separation to the end”

We see nothing in his odd personality, not to speak of his repulsive ideas, to explain such a devastatingly unique historical impact. Hitler remains an enigma.

Partly this is because he cultivated a sense of mystery; indeed, he would not even let himself be photographed until 1923. His bizarre outward appearance carried its own appeal in the cultured salons of Munich's upper crust in the 1920s. He was acutely aware of the importance of public image long before that became a feature of political life. Though mocked by his adversaries, his trademark moustache was just that – a deliberately distinctive feature.

On his path to power, and especially after he became Germany's leader in 1933, propaganda outpourings embellished the enigmatic aura. His 'court' photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann, produced a series of bestselling books of pictures that popularised the sense of mystery. They aimed to show Hitler as a man of the people and, at the same time, the political philosopher of genius in lofty isolation, among the mountains that surrounded his Alpine retreat near the

town of Berchtesgaden, Bavaria, as he pondered Germany's future and bore the entire burden of responsibility on his shoulders.

Hitler himself ensured that little material could be produced by his enemies to challenge or undermine the constructed imagery of heroic genius. The Gestapo seized and destroyed whatever documents they could find relating to his early life; indeed, much of what we know about his time in Linz and Vienna before the First World War is dependent on loaded 'memoirs' by a number of individuals who knew him reasonably well.

Only fragmentary evidence remains to elucidate a vital period of his development: a handful of his letters surviving from the First World War, a few official military records, and some recollections of contemporary comrades seen through the distorting mirror of his later fame. Hardly any later personal letters or memorabilia of Hitler himself have survived, because he ordered them all to be destroyed just before his death. He even kept his mistress a secret. Before the demise of the Third Reich, Eva Braun was a name known to hardly anyone in Germany outside Hitler's inner circle. This demonstrates his success in isolating his private sphere from his public life – and in an era before prying 24/7 television news and social networks, he was able to sustain this separation to the end.



Hitler poses with his propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, the latter's wife, Magda, and three of their children

Hitler purposely built up a wall of aloofness that very few were allowed to penetrate. He had hardly any intimates or genuine personal friends. Any urge for relaxation was tempered by the need to uphold his image. He did sometimes show a human side to his character: for example, playing with the Goebbels children; in his passionate love of Wagner's music, proclaimed during his visits to the Wagner clan at Bayreuth; or in biting mimicry when among his usual circle at his retreat on the Obersalzberg, near Berchtesgaden. But he was an excellent actor who could play many parts without allowing the mask of his leader's position ever to drop completely.

In his private sphere, Hitler was surrounded by fully fledged adepts of the personality cult of the leader: his regular entourage included his ubiquitous organiser and factotum, Martin Bormann; his adjutants and manservants; his secretaries; his close party cronies and their wives; one or two favourites, such as his propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, and his wife, Magda; and the architect Albert Speer. They spent time with him at close quarters but, though Goebbels especially was capable of critical insight, swallowed any criticism in favour of adulation. Hitler's 'achievements' were magnified.

Above all, his 'vision' seemed incomparable. Even at Hitler's Obersalzberg home, the Berghof, there was no real discussion in his presence. When Hitler spoke, everyone listened. No one sought to contradict him or enter into genuine argument. Whether met with rapt fascination or with bored passivity (his audience having often heard similar expositions many times before), the 'genius' of the führer was never questioned.



UIG VIA GETTY IMAGES

Polish prisoners at Buchenwald concentration camp near Weimar, c1943. The world continues to ask itself what sort of individual could be capable of the brutality displayed by Hitler. Yet it doesn't seem so concerned with asking the same question of Stalin or Mao

THE HISTORY ESSAY

“Hitler was a masterly demagogue. More than any other contemporary German politician, he spoke in a language that gave voice to the anger and prejudice of his audience”



Hitler makes a speech in 1934. He was among the first leaders to utilise radio and film for disseminating propaganda

Hitler was not without ability or knowledge. He was, of course, a masterly demagogue – the basis of his early dominance within the Nazi Party. More than any other contemporary German politician, he spoke in a language that gave voice to the anger and prejudice of his audience. It was effective because the message was both simple and radical – and because it was not the contrived product of a team of advisers and backroom spin-doctors but, rather, reflected his own burning hatreds. He wrote his own speeches and paid great attention to their delivery. Far from mere rants, they were finely attuned to the mood of the audience as he expertly played on the feelings his rhetoric awakened.

He also read a lot, if superficially and essentially to bolster his own prejudice. His excellent memory enabled him to recall information on many subjects. This impressed not only those around him and others who were already susceptible to his message, but also experienced ministers and foreign diplomats who were surprised at his detailed grasp of a complex brief, and military leaders whom he could outwit by his awareness of technical specifications of weapons or operational dispositions.

He knew a great deal about aspects of classical music, art and architecture – if within the

confines of his limited, inflexible taste – and enough to pontificate about history, religion and culture. This was the knowledge of the opinionated autodidact – but many highly respected politicians have known less, about less.

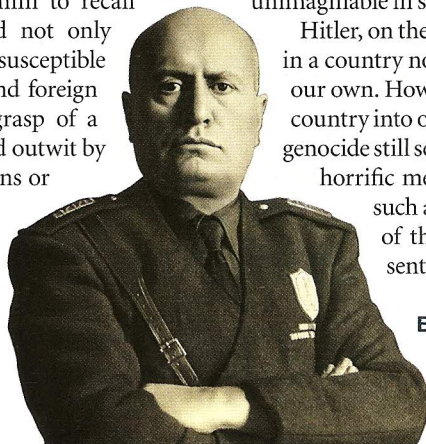
As his path to power and then his dominance of European politics during the 1930s showed, he was also politically astute, especially adept at dividing his opponents and going for the jugular where he detected weakness. It is impossible, however, to separate his talents from the aura of power that was constructed around him – an aura that certainly owed something to his own manufacture but was largely the creation of others.

This aura was elaborated through the regime's extraordinary demonstrations of power: the spectacular Nuremberg Rallies; the pervasive death cult manifested in the annual march through the streets of Munich to commemorate the fallen 'martyrs' of the failed putsch of 1923; or the monumental building plans intended to match those left behind by Pharaonic Egypt or classical Greece and Rome. He and Mussolini were also the first state leaders to maximise the use of radio and film for propaganda purposes.

Hitler was the clear focal point of these displays of power. Those of Fascist Italy, of Stalin's USSR, of Mao's China, of present-day North Korea and of other modern despotisms seem somehow less remarkable. It may be no coincidence that militaria fetishists appear to be far more captivated by German uniforms and SS paraphernalia than by those of Stalin's or any other army.

Why is this? Could it be that there is a certain awe, in a purely negative sense, at the nature of Hitler's vision – the scale of his megalomaniac dreams and ambitions? In the parade of 20th-century despots, Mussolini seems, however misleadingly, not just a scarcely credible buffoon but one whose territorial ambitions betray him as little more than an old-fashioned imperialist in modern garb. Franco seems a dull dictator – highly repressive, but in personal terms an uninteresting, narrow-minded bigot. Stalin looks like a modern variant of Russian tyranny down the ages, his mass murder (largely of his own citizens) mind-boggling yet somehow unsurprising. Even more remote to our mentality is Mao's China, where the horrors – as in Cambodia under Pol Pot or, more recently, in Rwanda – seem unimaginable in scale but to pose no great mystery.

Hitler, on the other hand, triumphed in a liberal democracy in a country not far away and not enormously different from our own. How he was able, in a short time, to transform that country into one engaged on a mission of racial conquest and genocide still seems scarcely explicable. And the vision of such horrific megalomania – the obliteration of major cities such as Leningrad or Moscow, the 'ethnic cleansing' of the entire continent and, of course, the death sentence pronounced on millions of Jews – still



Benito Mussolini's dictatorship has cast a far smaller shadow than Hitler's

“Hitler triumphed in a liberal democracy in a country not far away and not enormously different from our own. The horrors of Pol Pot or, more recently, Rwanda, are more remote to our mentality”



A man examines the bones of some of the hundreds of thousands of victims of Pol Pot's regime in Cambodia. What happened here, while “unimaginable in scale”, seems to pose “no great mystery”, says Ian Kershaw. Yet Hitler's crimes appear scarcely explicable

leaves us spellbound at the sense of the total, unconstrained power that Hitler embodied.

The unprecedented steepness of the descent into untold inhumanity is what underpins the continuing search for a better understanding of the man at its head. Hitler is the face of evil of the 20th century. Yet so successfully did he efface his own biographical remnants that even a most crucial question remains unanswered: we cannot be sure precisely when, why and how he became the pathological anti-semitic without whom the Holocaust – the central emblem of his political evil – is unlikely to have happened.

So should we be marking the 125th anniversary of his birth? I must confess that I do not greatly warm to the fad for historical anniversaries, and I am still less a fan of the ‘great man’ approach to historical explanation. To my mind, the eccentricities of Hitler's personality are less crucial than the reasons why the people of Germany were prepared to implement what they saw as Hitler's will.

Still, Hitler's imprint on history was profound. So the anniversary is worth noting, not for any quirky obsessiveness with the minutiae

of his character but because it reminds us of the most catastrophic collapse of humanitarian values – values that had lain at the heart of western political and moral thinking since the Enlightenment. And if this collapse happened once in European history, could it do so again? **H**

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Professor Sir Ian Kershaw is a historian formerly based at the University of Sheffield, and is the best-known modern biographer of Adolf Hitler

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

► Ian Kershaw's biography of Hitler, originally published in two parts as **Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris** (Penguin, 1998) and **Hitler 1936–1945: Nemesis** (Penguin, 2000), has since been compiled into a single volume, **Hitler** (Penguin, 2009)

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► Melvyn Bragg and guests **discuss Hitler on In Our Time** at bbc.co.uk/history/people/adolf_hitler

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