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Education Service



Adolf Hitler

Was Hitler a passionate lunatic?

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Introduction

Hitler is perhaps one of the most notorious characters of the 20th century. We know what atrocities were committed during the 12 years that Hitler led Nazi Germany and therefore, we have very firm opinions about him. Using hindsight (looking back with the knowledge of what has happened) we often ask why he was not stopped earlier. However, at the time, people could not predict what he would go on to do. Or could they?

By looking at sources from the time, we can see how people viewed him. Was he regarded as a "passionate lunatic" who would wreak havoc all over Europe? Or a slightly odd eccentric who was rebuilding Germany?

The sources below are from 1937. By this time Hitler had begun to reverse the Treaty of Versailles by rebuilding his army and moving troops into the Rhineland. He had also tried to unite Germany and Austria. Throughout this time he made passionate speeches about expanding German territory. These words and deeds worried some foreign observers.

Tasks

Look at Source 1

1. Report by Mr. Law, a British Businessmen, who worked in Germany:
 - a) What impression of Hitler do you get from this source?
 - b) Why, in Mr. Law's opinion, is Hitler dangerous?
 - c) Read paragraph 3 carefully. Is Mr. Law in favour of granting further concessions to Hitler?

Look at Source 2

2. This is a report on a conversation with Count Bernstorff a German anti-Nazi campaigner:
 - a) Which words suggest that Bernstorff disliked the Nazi regime?
 - b) From what is said in this source, what type of leader is Hitler?
 - c) Does this account of Hitler back up the view of Hitler in Source 1?
 - d) Can you trust Bernstorff's account?

Look at Source 3

3. This is a drawing of Adolf Hitler drawn by Richard Ziegler in about 1944:
 - a) What impression of Hitler does the picture give you?
 - b) How has the artist created this impression?
 - c) The government paid the artist to produce this picture. What instructions do you think the artist was given by the government?
 - d) Can the picture be considered as reliable evidence of what Hitler was like?

- e) Given the date of the picture, how accurate do you think it is at displaying how Hitler would have been acting? Why do you think this?

Look at Source 4

4. This is a short description of Hitler prepared by the British Embassy in Berlin:
- Does this account of Hitler confirm that he is a passionate lunatic?
 - How would you describe Hitler based upon this report?
5. Of the three accounts you have now read, is any one more reliable than the others? Explain your answer.
6. You have been asked by the British government to prepare a report on Hitler's state of mind. You have been provided with the sources above. Your report should:
- Explain how reliable the evidence you have based your report on is
 - Say whether Hitler is sane or not and provide evidence from the sources to support your answer

Background

By the late 1930s, Europe was again on the brink of war. Shortly after Hitler came to power in January 1933 he began to attack the Treaty of Versailles. First Hitler disregarded the ban on rearmament. Then he moved troops into the Rhineland (1936); united with Austria (1938) and then set his sights on expanding German territory.

Some people regarded Hitler as a strong leader merely getting back German territory. They thought he would stop once he had achieved a reversal of the Treaty of Versailles. Others feared that this was only the beginning of a much larger German policy of expansion and aggression. They were to be proved right by Hitler's takeover of the whole of Czechoslovakia in 1939, which contained no German speakers - nor had it been ever been part of Germany. The next to go would be Poland, bringing about the beginning of the Second World War.

How the British government dealt with Hitler in the run up to the outbreak of the Second World War has come under close scrutiny. The most common question asked is whether or not the British government should have done more to stop him earlier. But to have stopped Hitler might have meant declaring war - a massive decision when most countries wanted to avoid war at all cost. Britain kept a close watch on developments in Germany. In particular the government was very interested in Hitler's personality. They wanted to find out what he was like, what he wanted to achieve for Germany, what kind of leader he was and, strangely enough, if he were sane.

Teachers Notes

This exercise is good for getting pupils to look at conflicting evidence and assessing their reliability. The two accounts from German portray Hitler as a "lunatic" whereas the biography makes him sound quite astute. The cartoon, on the other hand clearly exaggerates Hitler's characteristics. However, it does bear some resemblance to the film footage of him at Nazi Party rallies!

This exercise can be used as an introduction to looking at the issue of appeasement and the decisions that were made in the run up to the outbreak of the war. It may help pupils who find it difficult to understand why Britain did not stop Hitler earlier.

Sources

Illustration : INF 2/31 Hitler caught between British and Russian military might

Source 1 : FO371/20733 Report by Mr.Law, a British Businessmen, who worked in Germany (1937)

Source 2 - FO371/20733 Report on a conversation with Count Bernstorff (1937)

Source 3 - INF 3/1298 Hitler in distress Artist's signature: Richard Ziegler 1944/1945

Source 4 - FO 408/67 A short description of Hitler prepared by the British Embassy in Berlin (January 1937)

Schemes of Work

Hot war, cold war why did the major twentieth-century conflicts affect so many people?

Key Stage 3, Unit 18.

Source 1 : Report by Mr. Law, a British Businessmen, who worked in Germany 1937 (FO 371/20733)

I am told, on what I believe to be very good German authority, that really the most dangerous man of all is the Führer himself. He falls into fits of passion and will listen to no advice. It was on his orders and against the advice of the Foreign Office and the army that recently an American was beheaded. It was again on his direct orders and before he could receive any advice that the bombardment of Almeria took place.

If this is true - as I believe it to be - the picture is not a cheerful one. Noone wants war; certainly, but when you have a passionate lunatic at the top who still commands the devotion of the populace and who is evidently prepared to run great risks, then already the situation is dangerous. But when, besides that, the Russian army appears not exactly at the height of its efficiency, when (as it is believed in Germany) France is tottering on the edge of communism and Franco is at the gates of Bilbao, then we ought to be on our guard.

I was told in Berlin that another publicity campaign was contemplated in England by ^{these English people who are} ~~the usual make-some-concessions-shake-the-hand-of-our-German-cousins group.~~ _{advocating close relations with Germany.} This I am informed both by Englishmen in Berlin and by patriotic Germans who do not like Nazism would be at this juncture a most disastrous mistake. No further advances should be made to Germany at the present time.

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I was told in Berlin that another publicity campaign was contemplated in England by those English people who are avoiding close relations with Germany. This I am informed both by Englishmen in Berlin and by patriotic Germans who do not like Nazism would be at this juncture a most disastrous mistake. No further advances should be made to Germany at the present time.

Source 2 : Report on a conversation with Count Bernstorff 1937 (FO 371/20733)

I had a talk last night with COUNT ALBRECHT BERNSTORFF, who has just arrived in London from Berlin. As is well known, he is a rabid anti-Nazi, and this fact must be taken into consideration in estimating the truth of his remarks. He was as usual full of stories and most entertaining. Compared with other opponents of the régime whom I know, his boldness is amazing, and he does not suffer, as most do, from the nervous glance over the shoulder (known as "der deutsche Blick") when speaking about conditions in Germany. I record some of his remarks in case they are of interest.

3. Count Bernstorff said that Herr Hitler has lately been more frequently subject to fits, in the course of which he foams at the mouth and becomes very violent. One such fit occurred a short time ago when he drove through Munich and saw that the rebuilding which he had planned was not progressing as fast as he had expected. On being told that the reason was the lack of iron and steel, he developed a fit and became so violent that he had to be restrained by his A.D.C's till a doctor could be sent for to give him a sedative injection. Herr Hitler's main occupation nowadays is town-planning and he plays about all day long with models of Berlin, Nuremberg and Munich. He takes practically no interest in anything else. None of his Ministers, except Goebbels and Goering, can be certain of access to him. His favourite companions are men such as Julius Streicher. Goebbels is, according to Count Bernstorff, somewhat out of favour at the moment and has lost influence in the country. Nevertheless, Hitler continues to use him as a source of ideas which he work up in his speeches.

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[Julius Streicher was the founder and publisher of Der Stürmer newspaper, Goebbels is Joseph Goebbels, the German Propaganda Minister, and Goering is Hermann Göring, the commander of the Luftwaffe.]

Source 3 : Hitler in distress Artist's signature: Richard Ziegler 1944/1945 (INF 3/1298)



Source 4 : A short description of Hitler prepared by the British Embassy in Berlin January 1937 (FO 408/67)

Hitler is a man of simple tastes, a vegetarian for health reasons, a non-smoker and teetotaler. Possessed of extraordinary vitality, four hours' sleep and twenty hours' work make up his normal working day. He is constantly on the move, usually by aeroplane or fast car. He manages to spend most week-ends at a little chalet in the Bavarian hills, the property of his sister. The profit on the enormous sales of *Mein Kampf* alone has made Hitler a rich man. He dislikes ceremony, and is only at his ease among his intimates, Hess, Brücker, &c.

As a speaker, Hitler exercises astonishing sway over a German audience, presumably because public speaking is an unknown art in Germany. His speeches are practically repetitions of a few simple main theses, in the course of which platitudes are uttered with such extraordinary emphasis that an unsophisticated audience mistakes them for newly minted political aphorisms. He has sized up the German audience during his fifteen years of apprenticeship with astonishing accuracy. This and an undeniable political instinct have brought him to the top of the tree. None of his followers approach him in demagogic talent. He alone can rouse the crowd to that state of political frenzy which makes all argument futile.

In appearance Hitler is unprepossessing, but is said to possess a certain charm of manner. Beyond an unfortunate love affair, in the course of which the object of his choice, a Munich lady of good social standing, rejected his suit, Hitler seems to have had little to do with the fair sex.

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