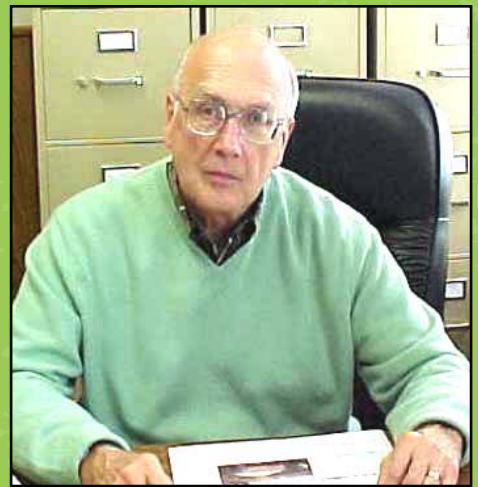


Hitler's Rhetorical Theory



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Describing Adolf Hitler requires strong language. Hitler's historical impact was enormous. British historian Ian Kershaw declares, "the 12 years of Hitler's rule permanently changed Germany, Europe, and the world."¹ Joachim Fest writes in his biography of Hitler, "history records no phenomenon like him. No one else produced such incredible accelerations in the pace of history."² At the end of the century and the millennium *Arts and Entertainment* and *Biography* asked 360 scholars, journalists, and political figures to rank "the most influential people in the past 1000 years." Hitler ranked sixteenth – the highest of any political world leader. His great contemporaries trailed far behind: Churchill 52nd, FDR 60th, and Stalin 79th.³



Evil Incarnate

Hitler was evil incarnate. For Hitler a fitting epitaph would be: "Because Adolf Hitler lived, 50 million people died." British historian and biographer of Hitler, Alan Bullock asks rhetorically, "If Hitler isn't evil who is?"⁴ In a "Person of the Century Essay" *Time* writes, "Hitler redefined the meaning of evil forever."⁵ R. J. Rummel, a political scientist at the University of Hawaii, in the *Encyclopedia of Genocide*, ranks Hitler behind only Stalin and Mao as the greatest killer of civilians in history: Stalin 43 million, Mao 38 million, Hitler 21 million.⁶

Indispensable

Hitler was indispensable. He built the Nazi party from seven members in 1919 to the largest political party in Germany in 1932. Through free elections from 1928 in fewer than four years the Nazis gained a plurality of seats in the Reichstag. Writes historian Robert Waite, "Hitler was Nazidom. Seldom in the history of western civilization has so much depended on one man's personality. He created his own political theory and a government that could not exist without him."⁷ Fest explains that Hitler virtually "created everything out of himself and was himself everything at once."⁸ Declares German historian Friedrich Meinecke, Hitler "is one of the great examples of the singular and incalculable power of personality in historical life."⁹

Great Orator

Hitler was a great public speaker. His claim in 1939 was probably correct, "I am conscious that I have no equal in the art of swaying the masses." Hitler scholars seem unanimous in recognizing his speaking skill. Writes Klaus Fisher, "Without his remarkable gift of persuasion, Hitler would never have reached such heights of power."¹⁰ CBS correspondent William Shirer, who heard Hitler often, declares, "Hitler has a magic power to sway millions with his voice."¹¹ British scholar of the Nazi era H. Trevor Roper explains, "Hitler, at the beginning, had only his voice...that was his only instrument of power. His only asset was his demagogic power over the masses, his voice."¹² Kershaw concedes, "his rhetorical talent was, of course, recognized even by his political enemies."¹³



Hitler understood the indispensable role rhetoric played in his quest for power. While brooding in a minimum security cell in Landsberg in 1924 for leading a failed coup de'tat -- the "beer hall putsch" -- Hitler told a friend, "When I resume work it will be necessary to pursue a new policy. Instead of working to achieve power through an armed coup, we shall have to hold our noses and enter the Reichstag against the Catholic and Marxist deputies. Sooner or later we shall have a majority, and after that -- Germany!"¹⁴ He would gain power through the ballot box.

Consummate Campaigner

Campaigning across Germany in free parliamentary elections against candidates from six established parties, Hitler led the Nazis from 12 seats in the 647 seat German Parliament in 1928 (800,000 votes) to 107 seats (6.4 million votes) in 1930. According to German historian Eberhard Jäckel, "This was the greatest increase ever gained by a party from one election to the next in German history."¹⁵ In 1932 Hitler campaigned furiously speaking at 148 rallies to perhaps 35 million Germans (Germany's population was 75 million). He was the first campaigner to use the airplane. The Nazis won 196 seats (31%) becoming the largest party in the Reichstag. On January 30, 1933, Hitler was appointed Chancellor by President Paul von Hindenburg. Writes Bullock, Hitler headed "the most powerful political party Germany had ever seen."¹⁶



He appealed to a cross section of German voters: poor, middle class, and wealthy. He had more support from Protestants (75% of the population) than Catholics and stronger support in small towns and cities than large cities. Farmers, 29% of the population, supported Hitler.¹⁷ Young Germans backed Hitler. Konrad Heiden, an early biographer, calls the Nazi movement "a movement of the young."¹⁸ Hitler appealed to many college students. The Nazis won "majority support in student council elections."¹⁹ Student councils organized "the burning of the books" first at Berlin University then at 19 of 23 university towns.²⁰ University professors also endorsed Hitler. Writes Bullock, after the purge of 15% of the 7,700 tenured professors, "the majority of the professors gave their support to the regime."²¹

Concludes Kershaw, "Hitler was no tyrant imposed on Germany. Though he never received majority support in free elections [according to Jäckel no political party in the Wiemar Republic ever had] he was legally appointed to power and became, between 1933 and 1940, arguably the most popular head of state in the world. It has been suggested that at the peak of his popularity nine Germans in ten were 'Hitler supporters,' 'Fuhrer Believers.'"²²

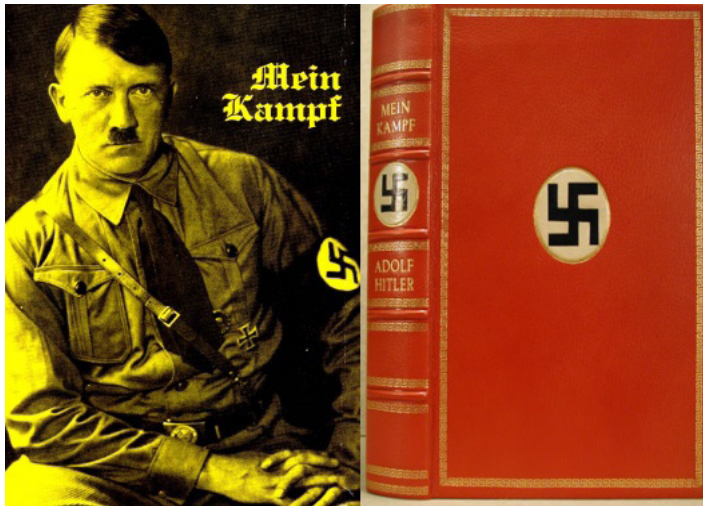
Among his early "fans" was Winston Churchill who, in 1936, called Hitler the "greatest German of the age. He has restored Germany's honor." A year later Churchill described Hitler's achievements as "among the most remarkable in the whole history of the world" and "I've always said that if Great Britain were defeated in war I hoped we should find a Hitler to lead us to our rightful position among nations."²³

Hitler as Speech Writer

Hitler once declared, "everything I have accomplished I owe to persuasion." He knew rhetoric was the key to his success. According to Kershaw, "when it came to preparing his speeches, which he composed himself, he would withdraw into his room and could work deep into the night several evenings running, occupying three secretaries taking dictation straight into the typewriters before carefully correcting the drafts."²⁴ Joseph Goebbels, Nazi Propaganda Minister, notes, "Hitler spoke very proudly of the fact that he corrected his speeches three, four, five times."²⁵

Hitler's Rhetorical Theory

In preparing his speeches Hitler drew from a personal rhetorical theory that can be found scattered throughout his autobiography *Mein Kampf*, expressed in impromptu comments recorded in *Hitler's Table Talk, 1941-1944*, and mentioned by numerous aides in memoirs and diaries. The purpose of this essay is to describe Hitler's rhetorical theory. It is uncommon for heads of state to conceive and write a rhetorical theory perhaps because they rarely compose their speeches. Hitler and Churchill are exceptions. Both leaders wrote their own speeches from carefully considered rhetorical theories.



Spoken Word Superior

Fundamental to Hitler's rhetorical theory is his conviction that, for leadership, the spoken word is superior to the written word. So ingrained is this principle that Hitler

expresses it in the brief one-page preface to *Mein Kampf*: "I know that men are won over less by the written than by the spoken word, that every great movement on this earth owes its growth to orators and not to great writers."²⁶ Hitler dismisses "fops and knights of the pen" who "for leadership" are "neither born nor chosen. The broad masses of people can be moved only by the power of speech."²⁷

Contempt for Germans

Hitler accepts Aristotle's axiom that the audience is "the end or object of the speech."²⁸ Hitler had contempt for his German audiences declaring, "the masses are slow moving and always require a certain time before they are ready even to notice something, and only after the simplest ideas are repeated thousands of times will the masses remember them."²⁹ In a preface to *Hitler's Table Talk* British historian H. R. Trevor Roper describes Hitler's opinion of the German people: *Dickschadel* (thick skulled), *Querschadde* (mentally fouled up) and *Dumm Köpfe* (dumb, stupid).³⁰ Hitler did not conceal his contempt. He told 200,000 cheering Berliners in 1926, "the broad masses are blind and stupid and don't know what they are doing. They are primitive in attitude."³¹ Hitler was especially condescending toward women: "to convince women by reasoned argument is always impossible."³² German historian Werner Maser explains, "Hitler knew his people -- the masses he so detested. More than that, he despised them and said so openly without circumspection -- and still they applauded him."³³

Propaganda is Primary

For Hitler propaganda -- mass persuasion -- was indispensable in coming to power and building his Third Reich. He declares, "propaganda, propaganda, all



that matters is propaganda.”³⁴ He believes “propaganda is a weapon, though a frightful one in the hand of an expert.”³⁵ For Hitler propaganda and public speaking are indistinguishable; oratory is a crucial part of propaganda. Hitler’s propaganda theory is his rhetorical theory.

Repetition

Hitler writes that a fundamental principle of propaganda (and rhetoric) is repetition: “The most brilliant propagandist technique will yield no success unless one fundamental principle is born in mind constantly and with unflagging attention. Propaganda must confine itself to a few points and repeat them over and over again.”³⁶ Hitler’s disdain for the audience drives his rhetorical theory: “the receptivity of the masses is very limited; their intelligence is small, but their power of forgetting is enormous. Consequently, all effective propaganda must harp on a few slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan.”³⁷ Hitler agrees with Sigmund Freud, who wrote in 1924, the same year Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf*, “the orator who wishes to sway a crowd must exaggerate, and he must repeat the same thing again and again.”³⁸

Consolidate Enemies

Because of his low opinion of the audience’s intelligence Hitler believes “all effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points.”³⁹ While campaigning, Hitler’s “few points” were Germany’s plight, the “diktat’ of Versailles”, the “corrupt and cowardly” Weimar government, the “November Criminals” who “stabbed Germany in the back” in 1918, Communism, and the Jews, “the most diabolical creatures in existence.”⁴⁰ Hitler cautions against attacking multiple enemies because “as soon as the wavering masses are confronted with too many enemies objectivity at once steps in and the question is raised whether actually all the others are wrong and your movement alone is right.”⁴¹ Thus, “it is necessary to indict one sole enemy to march against one sole enemy.”⁴² Because his enemies were numerous Hitler believed “it is part of the genius of a great leader to make adversaries of different fields appear as always belonging to one category.”⁴³



Hitler’s Scapegoat – the Jew

Hitler’s primary enemy, his scapegoat, became the Jew. He proclaims, “my enemy is Germany’s enemy: always and only the Jew.”⁴⁴ Thus, “to march against one sole enemy” Hitler fuses anti-Semitism and anti-Bolshevism into “Jewish Bolshevism.”⁴⁵ He declares, “80% of the Soviet leaders are Jews.”⁴⁶ Writes Robert Waite, “Who stabbed Germany in the back? Who signed the armistice? Who had accepted the ‘Treaty of Shame’? Who caused the inflation and the Great Depression? The answer was clear and compelling; ‘always and only the Jew.’”⁴⁷ Explains

Klaus Fisher, “Anti-Semitism, in fact, was the oxygen of Hitler’s political life. Anti-Semitism was the hate that fueled the Nazi Movement.”⁴⁸ Writes Waite, anti-Semitism “was as important to Hitler as economics was to Marx.”⁴⁹ Hitler scapegoated the Jews strategically. In 1926 he told an associate, “anti-Semitism is a useful revolutionary expedient. My Jews are a valuable hostage given to me by the Democracies. You will see how little time we need to upset the ideas of the whole world simply by attacking Judaism. Anti-Semitism is beyond question the most important weapon in my propaganda arsenal and I use it with almost deadly efficiency.”⁵⁰

Black-and-White Reasoning

Hitler's rhetorical theory also emphasizes one sided, black-and-white, all-or-nothing reasoning, because "the thinking of the people is not complicated but very simple and all of one piece. Their thinking does not have multiple shadings. It has positive and negative, love or hate, right or wrong, truth or lie but never half this way and half that way."⁵¹ For Hitler, objective propaganda is foolish: "what would we say about a poster that advertises a new soap and describes other soaps as 'good?' We would only shake our heads. Exactly the same applies to political advertising. The function of propaganda is not to weigh and ponder the rights of different people, but exclusively to emphasize the one right you have set out to argue for. Propaganda's task is not to make an objective study of the truth, in so far as it favors the enemy, and then set it before the masses with 'academic' fairness. Propaganda's task is to serve our own right, always and unflinchingly."⁵²

The Big Lie

Basic to Hitler's rhetorical theory was his belief that the end justifies the means. He declares, "propaganda is a means and must be judged by its end."⁵³ For Hitler, an indispensable element of his rhetorical theory was lying. Hitler recognizes the advantage of lying and describes his rhetorical strategy for telling the big lie:

"In the size of the lie there is a certain factor of credibility, because, with the primitive simplicity of their feelings the masses fall victim more easily to a big lie than to a small one. Since they themselves occasionally lie in small matters, but the masses of people would be ashamed to tell great lies. Such a falsehood would not enter their minds, and they will not be able to imagine others asserting, with great boldness, the most infamous misrepresentation. And even with the explanation of the matter the masses long hesitate and vacillate and accept some ground as true. Consequently, from the most bold lie something will remain."⁵⁴

Hitler rationalizes lying: "For myself personally I would never tell a lie, but there is no falsehood I would not perpetuate for Germany's sake."⁵⁵

Conscience was irrelevant. According to Hitler, "conscience is a Jewish invention like circumcision. My task is to free men from the dirty and degrading ideas of conscience and morality."⁵⁶



Passion over Reason

Underlying Hitler's rhetorical theory is his assumption of the Ciceronian maxim: "man is moved more by passion than by reason."⁵⁷ Declares Hitler, "persuasion must be aimed at the emotions and only to a very limited degree at the so called intellect" because "the people in their overwhelming majority are so feminine by nature and attitude that sober reasoning determines their thoughts and actions far less than emotions and feeling."⁵⁸ Hitler explains, "my purpose is to arouse, to whip up, to incite."

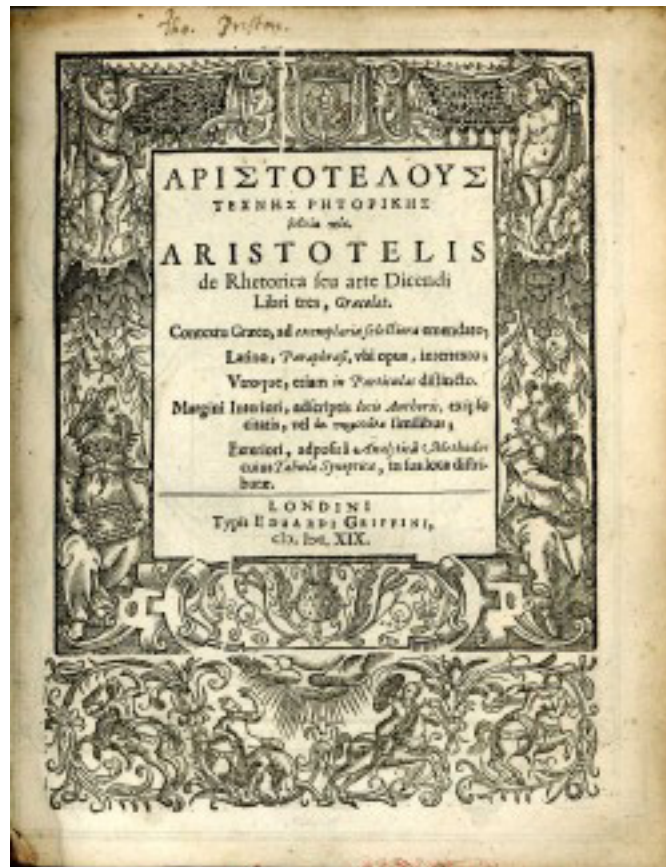
Summary

Hitler realized that to assume power he had to win at the ballot box, and to win elections he must persuade the German people to elect Nazi deputies to the Reichstag. He constructed a pragmatic Machiavelian rhetorical theory, based on a cynical analysis of his audience, that emphasized repetition, scapegoating, black-and-white reasoning, lying, and emotional appeal.

In 1919 Hitler's regimental adjunct described Corporal Hitler: "He was a particularly quiet, modest, dutiful subordinate with no capacity whatever for leadership."⁵⁹ At that time the thirty-year old Hitler agreed: "I don't think I could have spoken to 20 people without being at a loss for words."⁶⁰ Hitler was probably correct when he boasted 20 years later, "I am conscious that I have no equal in the art of swaying the masses." Hitler's amazing and awful career was built on his rhetorical skill.

Rhetoric "Wrongly Employed"

Explaining the amorality of rhetoric Aristotle wrote, "if it is urged that an abuse of the rhetorical faculty can work great mischief, the same charge can be brought against all good things (save virtue itself) such as strength, health, wealth, and military skill. Rightly employed, they work the greatest blessings, and wrongly employed they work the utmost harm."⁶¹ Hitler is the supreme example of a speaker who embodies rhetoric "wrongly employed" working "the utmost harm."



Endnotes

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- ⁵ *Time*, "Person of the Century", September 21, 1999.
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- ²² Jäckel, p. 9 Kershaw, p. xxix: Ian Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1.
- ²³ Martin Gilbert, *Churchill: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1991), 457. Winston Churchill, *Great Contemporaries* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 226. Cited in Patrick J. Buchanan, *Churchill, Hitler, and the Unnecessary War* (New York: Crown Published, 2008), 173-174.
- ²⁴ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889-1936 Hubris* (New York-London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 535.
- ²⁵ Joseph Goebbels, *The Goebbels Diaries*, ed. Louis P. Lochner (New York: Universal Publishers & Distributors, 1971).
- ²⁶ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943), Preface.
- ²⁷ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943), 106, 107.

²⁸ Aristotle, *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, trans., Lane Cooper (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1960), 16.
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⁵⁰ Herman Rausching, *Hitler Speaks* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1939), 233.

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⁵⁹ Rudolph Binion, *Hitler Among the Germans* (New York: Elsevier, 1979), 2.

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