

American Opinion About Hitler During World War II

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ABSTRACT

Adolph Hitler is certainly one of the most prominent men in history. When most people think of Hitler they think of the Holocaust. In modern times Hitler's name has become synonymous with evil. But what did Hitler's contemporaries think? Using feature stories and editorials from the *New York Times*, this paper tracks American opinion of Adolph Hitler from 1940 to 1945.

Adolph Hitler was born in Braunau, Austria where he lived throughout his youth. He enlisted during World War I and was decorated twice for bravery while serving. After leaving the army, Hitler helped to organize the German Workers Party, later named the Nazi Party, where he was a popular and charismatic leader. Hitler's strengths as an orator were realized at this time. He used his skills to gain the support of the veterans that he had served with during World War I.

In 1923 Hitler and his followers were imprisoned for trying to take over the government of Germany. It was during his time in prison that Hitler dictated *Mein Kampf* to Rudolf Hess. The book described Hitler's program for the restoration of Germany to a dominant position in Europe. Ten years after his imprisonment, riding the tide of desperation in German public opinion, Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany.

Just one short year after his appointment Hitler took control of the government by combining the office of President with his own office. By 1934 he was the self appointed Führer of Germany. As the new Führer, Hitler wanted nothing less than the destruction of the Treaty of Versailles and the transformation of Germany into the chief military power in Europe.

From 1934 through 1940, Hitler focused on training and preparation for the possible destruction of all other nations in order to bring them forcibly under German rule. During this time, Hitler became famous throughout the world. Judging from the reactions of the writers, editors, and subscribers of the *New York Times*, people were beginning to wonder whether Adolph Hitler was a mastermind or a madman.

By 1940, many people saw Hitler as a great intellectual, and many news stories focused on Hitler's character and personality. Georgetown University polled the students on who they saw as the most outstanding personality.¹ They named none other than Adolph Hitler. Princeton University held a similar poll with

the same result.² Even the world renowned *British Who's Who* listed Hitler in "men most in the public eye today."³ This shows Hitler's prominence in the world at that time.

Some of the interest in Hitler was due to the fact that his book *Mein Kampf* had just been published. Many people noticed that Hitler laid out in this book his plan to take over Germany, Europe and possibly the whole world. He believed that the Aryan race (who created the swastika and had a similar empire as the one he was creating) was, "the master race which conquers inferior peoples, then regulated their practical activity under its commands for its aims, but also for the conquered peoples' own good."⁴ Hitler hoped to recreate this type of empire. Many people believed that Hitler had the intelligence to do this.

Adolph Hitler in 1940 was a man of many faces. He appeared to people as harsh yet kind. He was loved, worshiped, respected, feared and hated. According to two articles in the *New York Times*, there were a total of five Hitlers.

1. The private Hitler was seen as a "little man." He had always been a quiet person who kept to himself. He was obviously not from the old ruling class because his plan was to build a new one.
2. The official Hitler was very recognizable. He had many distinctive characteristics of a leader. He was "a mass orator, dictator, warlord, self-confident, scornful, and omniscient."⁵ This Hitler acted the part of the fearless leader and never wavered in front of his followers.
3. The original Hitler appeared to be aimless, moody, and complacent. He simply toyed with matters of leadership and adversity.

² *New York Times* 2 May 1940: page 19.

³ *New York Times* 12 December 1940: page 13.

⁴ *New York Times* 4 February 1940: Sec. 4, page 4.

⁵ *New York Times* 19 May 1940: Sec. 3, page 7.

¹ *New York Times* 25 February 1940: Sec. 8, page 2.

4. The private Hitler showed the thoughts and origins of his ideas, and helped prepare the fifth Hitler for the outside world.
5. The mystical Hitler was the one that everyone in Germany was following. He was the Hitler that had come into the public eye and placed fear in the hearts of many people.⁶

Ironically, Hitler is said to have been eligible for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1940. This award is given to someone who has done the most work to promote friendship and peace throughout the world.

Willingly or not, he has promoted friendship among the free nations by confronting them with a common danger. He has caused Americans to feel their kinship with the British, the Greeks and the Chinese, and with the lovers of liberty in France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark and Norway. He has waged war in such a way as to awaken that great part of the world which is still free to a passionate determination to destroy, by war or means short of war, the Nazi standing armies. He has given impetus to movements for a peace congress which will unite earth's democracies against all systems and all rulers whose natural tendency is toward war. He has raised peace from a benevolent aspiration to a necessity for which men will lay down their lives.⁷

Other articles discussed the possibility of Armageddon between the 'haves' and the 'have nots.' This was Hitler's story. He grew up a 'have not' and became a 'have', and his goal was to replace the current 'haves' with the 'have nots.'⁸

By 1941, many people had read *Mein Kampf* and Hitler's ideas were better understood. People began to see the origins of his thoughts, and their focus on the war turned to fear of Hitler. People all over the world were openly discussing their fears, plots of assassination, and his possible insanity.

Everything Hitler said in his book was coming true. He actually did many of the terrible things he said he would do. However, Hitler's actions had begun to vary from his published plan and people had no idea whether to believe his book anymore. One story reported that Hitler had admitted to being a liar. He said, "the masses would more easily fall victim to a great lie than to a small one."⁹

People began to voice their opinions on what should happen to Hitler if he were captured. Many people believed Hitler should die. In fact, a group of Harvard

men formed a "suicide squadron" to capture and assassinate Hitler and his men.¹⁰ Many people were eager to hear Hitler's funeral broadcasted for all to hear. These were morbid thoughts, but they were inspired by a very morbid man.

By 1942, Hitler was no longer gaining popularity. His German followers remained loyal partly because they had no choice. "Victory could now seal his conquest for decades; defeat would send him and his nation to destruction."¹¹

Germany had begun to lose its edge. In 1940, Germany was victorious and feared by many. By 1942, Germany was losing battles and losing strength. Hitler was still feared as an individual, but his plan was no longer taken seriously by many people. Hitler worked his men hard as he worked himself, but it was uncertain if that would be enough. But Hitler and Germany were not going to give up easily on their goal. It seemed to most people that Hitler would have to be killed in order to stop him.

More than ever, people wanted Hitler dead. For example, "The monument builders of New Jersey, at their annual convention tonight, adopted a resolution to send a free gift to Adolf Hitler, if he will cooperate. The gift? A tombstone."¹² One U.S. Senator said, "Hitler should be hanged for what he had done."¹³

The most surprising thing of all was that Hitler drafted his funeral and wills for all to see. Perhaps Hitler feared he would die soon. It was certain however that Hitler saw himself as a mastermind and a genius. He wanted to keep his name, face and ideas alive after he was gone. Scientists were ordered to write papers discussing the structure of his skull and to dissect his brain for posterity. Hitler also ordered a deified picture to be painted of himself. He worked out his funeral arrangements so it could be an unforgettable experience.¹⁴ Hitler apparently didn't care or was unaware that his self image was very different from the public's view of him. He saw himself as an angel-like figure and the most prominent man in the world.

Several movies which portrayed Hitler as one of the worst villains in history came out at this time.¹⁵ In 1943, Disney made a film about Hitler's ideas of racial superiority in order to warn the public about his plans.¹⁶

Hitler continued to be prominent in the news in 1943. The Nazis were in crisis and they were looking to Hitler for help. News articles reported that 542,000 Germans were dead, that Hitler was dead, that Hitler was insane, that Hitler had stabilized Germany, that Hitler and Germany were on the verge of collapse.

¹⁰ *New York Times* 19 February 1941: pages 1 and 7.

¹¹ *New York Times* 14 June 1942: Sec. 5, page 7.

¹² *New York Times* 28 January 1942: page 6.

¹³ *New York Times* 4 June 1942: page 12.

¹⁴ *New York Times* 9 June 1942: page 11.

¹⁵ *New York Times* 1 September 1942: page 22.

¹⁶ *New York Times* 2 February 1943: page 23.

⁶ *New York Times* 14 January 1940: Sec. 3, page 7 and 19 May 1940: Sec. 3, page 7.

⁷ *New York Times* 17 December 1940: page 24.

⁸ *New York Times* 19 May 1940: Sec. 3, page 7.

⁹ *New York Times* 7 August 1941: page 2.

News reports of 1944 questioned Hitler's leadership abilities. Is Hitler really suffering from a breakdown, or is he just trying to fool the world? Some news stories compared him to great men such as Fredrick the Great and Napoleon I, and others ridiculed such comparisons.¹⁷ Many stories focused on Hitler's life and supposed insanity. People were trying to find out what had sparked his ideas about ruling the world with his master race. A general in Hitler's own army reported that Hitler was mad. He reported that he had heard Hitler say, "the deaths of all those millions of people were only episodes."¹⁸ Hitler failed to appear and speak at an event that he had planned to attend, sending other Nazi officials to take his place. This failure to appear touched off a number of speculations about Hitler's mental and physical health. Some people believed that Hitler was suffering from serious paranoia and was afraid to be in the spotlight. Other people believed that Hitler was paralyzed or dead.

In 1945 reports of Hitler's insanity were still making headlines. Many people believed that Adolph Hitler would be found insane if captured. They did not feel that executing Hitler for his crimes was appropriate because the Germans would consider him a martyr. They thought he should have to face the people he had hurt and see the negative effects of his actions on the world.

Rumors started to circulate about a double for Hitler. He was supposed to be a total look-alike, and he was trained to "be" Hitler and was supposedly going to die a martyr's death on the battlefield so that Hitler could be glorified without dying.¹⁹

After Hitler was reported dead people were not certain whether they should believe the reports. Some believed it only because they thought that Hitler would only let go of his dream of world domination if he were dead. Indeed, Hitler and his newlywed, Eva Braun, committed suicide on April 30, 1945. Hitler shot himself in the mouth with a revolver, and Eva took poison to end her life. Prior to this double suicide, Hitler had ordered Nazi officials to take his and Eva's bodies and

cremate them so that no remains could fall into enemy hands. As a result, people have wondered ever since, whether or not Hitler was really dead. People even wondered if he could have escaped and had a double die in his place. When Hitler's last will and testament was found shortly after his death, it confirmed his suicide plot in intricate detail. A foreign diplomat said:

I am even sure Hitler is dead. I know he was a sick man, shaking with palsy, hardly able to walk and certainly unable to climb any barricade. I'm sure that they will never find his body, because the Nazis burned him to build up the legend of his fighting when actually he was hiding in a safe shelter. He already was so sick that I'm sure Himmler helped him on his way to death.²⁰

From 1940 to 1945, Adolph Hitler, the architect of Nazi Germany, created fear and horror the likes of which the world had never seen. American opinion about Hitler went from wonder, to morbid fascination, to fear, to disbelief and outright hatred. The modern public still has a morbid fascination with infamous characters such as Charles Manson and Ted Bundy whose actions defy the moral standards that nearly all Americans uphold. But Adolf Hitler is still the most infamous villain of all. His tactics, intelligence, and insanity made him one of the most prominent figures of all time.

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¹⁷*New York Times* 6 August 1944: page 21.

¹⁸*New York Times* 27 August 1944: page 21.

¹⁹*New York Times* 19 April 1945.

²⁰The *New York Times* 21 November 1945, page 8.