

Age of Extremes: Assessment 1 by Eleanor Thorpe

Gobbet: Critical Analysis of Primary Source Material, 2000 words.

Address by Adolf Hitler, Chancellor of the Reich, before the Reichstag, Berlin
1 September 1939

Adolf Hitler was the Chancellor of Germany and the Fuhrer of the Nazi regime, delivered a speech to the Reichstag in Berlin 1 September 1939, the day German forces invaded Poland, with the aim to frame the justification of the invasion in an address that shaped European history.

The address was broadcast through German state-controlled media and was wide-reaching to domestic German audiences and international audiences alike, and so it is implicit that this speech should be considered as a constructive, biased political statement and not as fact-based. This speech was used to justify Germany's invasion of Poland, its defenses against the West, and to account for Germany's economic sacrifices to facilitate war.

The speech is an example of propaganda with selective presentation, language and historically inaccurate references used to legitimize war, international political relationship breakdowns, the distrust of the West and to confirm improved relations with the Soviet Union "*Russia and Germany fought against one another in the World War. That shall and will not happen a second time*" and alliances with Italy "*I should like here above all to thank Italy, which throughout has supported us*". It fails to address the expansionism of the Nazi territory, the staged Gleiwitz Incident used to fabricate Polish aggression and The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact which contradicted Hitler's anti-communist stance and secretly agreed to the division of Poland between Germany and the Soviet Union.

Hitler rose to power in the wake of the Weimar Republic's weakness and the economic depression that followed from 1929. He exploited the economic hardships, widespread unemployment and territorial losses suffered by Germany at the time to build his nationalist agenda and take legal leadership of Germany.

After the First World War, Hitler joined a small political group called the German Workers' Party (DAP), which then later went on to become the National Socialist German Workers Party (Nazi Party). After legally gaining power as Chancellor of Germany in 1933, he passed the Enabling Act in which allowed his cabinet to enact laws without the consent of parliament, effectively granting him dictatorial powers.

The timing of the speech is crucially relevant, Hitler declares that at 5:45am Poland fired shots first "*Poland has directed its attacks against the Free City of Danzig*", and that immediate retaliation was required, framing the start of the conflict before the speech had been delivered without any

opportunity to diffuse the situation. On this same day Hitler invaded Poland, a significantly rapid escalation that contradicts Hitler's speech *"In the same way, I have also tried to solve the problem of Danzig, the Corridor, etc., by proposing a peaceful discussion"* Here he explains his actions as peace-keeping and developed on discussions, which is a clear contradiction to his actions on this day.

The fight for territory is rooted to Hitler's distrust of the Treaty of Versailles, since its signing in 1919 the Nazi party had developed an aggressive foreign policy aimed at overturning the treaty which had forced Germany to lose 13% of its land and territory, this led to the Nazis pursuing territorial expansions by force such as the annexation of Austria in 1938 and was evident as a clear grievance in the speech as it forms the opening part *"we have been suffering under the torture of a problem which the Versailles Dictat created"* Using words such as "torture" and alluding that German minorities in Danzig had been ill-treated in what he saw as stolen land created the grounding for drumming up nationalist vulnerabilities to be exploited.

One of the primary purposes of this speech was to deliver German victimhood propaganda and to legitimize the aggressive expansion of the Nazi regime. Hitler vehemently used the Treaty of Versailles as justification for retaliation by presenting it as an injustice, he refers to signing the treaty as being forced *"with pistols to our heads"*, creating vivid imagery of brutality and using emotional manipulation. This vendetta rhetoric is seen throughout the speech *"Whoever fights with poison gas will be fought with poison gas. Whoever departs from the rules of humane warfare can only expect that we shall do the same"* Hitler repeatedly uses violent, bloody verbiage to expand the central theme of German victimization and injustice and the right to retaliate with equally brutal force. This appealed greatly to many people of Germany at the time as the country was still locked in economic depression following WWI, Nazi propaganda portrayed Hitler as a messianic, superhuman figure who saved Germany from economic crisis and depression.

Hitler repeatedly invokes the language of "peace" and refers to peaceful negotiations and approaches over ten times in this speech *"But I am wrongly judged if my love of peace and my patience are mistaken for weakness or even cowardice"*, this was crucial content to engage with the people as the German people were at the time reluctant to engage in a war and simultaneously paints the oppositions as unreasonable, non-peace focused and indicates that his depiction by opponents is inaccurate. This was a coercive strategy using the ideological term "peace" to re-shape the people's understanding of what was required in order to achieve peace and to convince them that they were acting in good faith by supporting the war, which was in contrast with the actions of German Military later that day and also in the years preceding the speech.

This repeated use of the word "peace" directly contradicts Hitler's previous diplomatic actions where he would use military force masked as peaceful diplomacy. Examples such as the

Remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, whereby he violated the Treaty of Versailles by sending in troops to test the willingness of the British and French to react.

The annexation of Austria in 1938 was a result of pressuring the chancellor of Austria Kurt Schuschnigg into Nazism, threatening invasion and forcing his resignation. This behavior can also be seen when Hitler broke the Munich agreement 6 months after signing it, forcing France and Britain to hand over the territory in 1938.

Hitler's address seeks to persuade that the acts of aggression are a necessity and is used to frame Germany's actions as justified, legitimate and as an act of defense and protection, he used the villainization of Poland and accuses the Polish government of committing atrocities against Germans including the killing of women and children *"I do not know in what these provocations on the part of women and children consist, if they themselves are maltreated, in some cases killed. One thing I do know - that no great Power can with honour long stand by passively and watch such events."* This use of language is designed to cause outrage and justify retaliation, but these were false and exaggerated claims that were part of the wider propaganda effect to also damage the credibility of the opposition.

Hitler's personal approach and projected openness falsely presented vulnerability and his own victimization *"My whole life has been nothing but one long struggle for my people, for its restoration, and for Germany"* Depicting himself as a soldier of the people, and thus exploiting that language of unity to prepare the people to themselves become soldiers for their country. The emotional manipulation is laced with his charismatic delivery and when he defends his character and actions with imagery *"I have once more put on that coat that was the most sacred and dear to me"* This works to install a mobilization mentality in the people, with Hitler expressing his emotional and lifelong attachment to the uniform and conveying the pride he has and thus the people should have to represent Germany in war and portraying an image of cult leadership and moral authority with the use of strong theatrical language used to encourage obedience and sacrifice.

What is significant in this speech is also what is omitted from this speech, whilst he references territorial losses and uses them as injustices for the German people, he does not acknowledge that the Nazis annexed Austria or occupied Czechoslovakia, he only mentions these as false examples of peacekeeping on his part.

Hitler uses propaganda to portray Britain as uncooperative, claiming *"I have repeatedly offered friendship and, if necessary, the closest co-operation to Britain, but this cannot be offered from one side only. It must find a response on the other side. Germany has no interests in the West,"* However, this is misleading as British and France had already pursued appeasement through the Munich agreement (1938) which allowed Germany to annex the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. By not acknowledging this in the speech, Hitler creates a narrative in which

Germany appears to be the reasonable actor and Britain is the obstructive one, masking his own oppressive expansionism. These assurances were ultimately unreliable and proved to be false as demonstrated during WW2 when Germany invaded France and bombed London in 1940. This highlights that the claims in the speech were intended to shape short term immediate politics and mobilization as opposed to long-term peace-keeping consistencies.

In contrary to Hitlers use of the word “peace” and his portrayal of Britain in this speech, during the same time-period on 30 September 1938, the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain wrote *“My good friends, for the second time in our history, a British Prime Minister has returned from Germany bringing peace with honour / I believe it is peace for our time”*

This is an example of peace and diplomacy that came from the same event in history; the signing of the Munich Agreement. Chamberlain's speech did not then proceed with the invasion of Poland, unlike Hitler who claimed peace and then enacted war within the same day.

The assessment of the purpose and audience of this speech shows that clearly it was signed to serve as a fundamental operation of propaganda domestically, with the intention of justifying the invasion of Poland by presenting it as retaliation and defense. The speech also makes significant emphasis on the German suffering, both in the past and in the future *“The sacrifice that is demanded of us is not greater than the sacrifice that many generations have made.”*

Using dramatic wording to incite unity in revenge and protection, and unity in suffering and death, thus seemingly laying the groundwork for what was to come in the following years in Germany and Europe directly after this address was made. The speech was also I believe aimed at international audiences with its use of perceptions of oppositions and allies to create a narrative that would potentially limit any intervention or invasion by other countries. In the same speech Hitler aims to justify his actions in Poland yet also avoid any provocation or escalations with broader conflicts with powerful militaries.

For use as a primary historical source this speech does have value and merit, but due to its broad bias and wide use of Nazi propaganda and exaggerations it has limitations and so cannot be used as a factually accurate primary source document. It is a revealing speech from a day in time that encapsulated a moment between decades of built up and decades of fall out of change in Europe. Its language and narrative were used to justify brutality and war, and it shows the regime's priorities and weaknesses.

It falsifies accusations of Polish aggression, German victimhood and Nazi diplomacy and omits factual events and key aspects of expansionism and Nazi policy, all in order to manipulate a country into supporting war at a time they wanted peace, and so must be read critically and ultimately reveals how the Nazi regime gained the support of the German people and the momentum of political power.

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