

What if Adolf Hitler Was Never Born?

by Christopher Bates



A popular way of exploring history—among the general public, not among professional historians—is to play “What if?” What if Columbus had never reached the New World? What if Napoleon had won at Waterloo? What if Lincoln wasn’t assassinated in 1865? What if penicillin was never invented? This general approach to the past, which blends both fact and fiction, is called “alternate history.”

Because World War II was very recent, and had such a profound impact on the world, it is a popular subject for these sorts of questions. What if the atomic bomb was never dropped on Japan? What if Winston Churchill had died when he was hit by a car in 1931 (which he was)? What if the United States had entered the war a year earlier? Or a year later? And, of course: What if Adolf Hitler had never been born? Whole books have been written on this subject, most notably Stephen Fry’s *Making History*. And I would suggest the answer to the question (and Fry largely agrees with me, by the way) is that history would not be much different, even if Adolf Hitler was never born.

When people are suffering terribly their leaders can really take one of two basic approaches. The first is to “rally the troops,” offering a message focused on hope and triumph over adversity—in other words, appealing to the better parts of human nature. I would suggest that President Roosevelt took this basic approach during the Great Depression, and so too did Great Britain’s Winston Churchill, among other examples.

The other approach is to find someone to blame for the nation’s problems—in other words, appealing to the worst parts of human nature. The formal term for this strategy is ‘demagoguery.’ Historically, various demagogues have chosen all sorts of social groups as their targets—Jews, Christians, Muslims, ethnic minorities, the rich, the poor, immigrants, homosexuals, women, and citizens of neighboring nations among them. Adolf Hitler, of course, was a demagogue.

Was the rise of a demagogue inevitable in 1930s Germany? I would say so. The humiliation of losing World War I, the economic problems caused by the reparations payments to Britain and France, and the effects of a worldwide depression created a situation ripe for the emergence of someone like Hitler. Further, the man who led Germany immediately before Hitler—whose name was Paul von Hindenburg—tried very hard to rally the German people and to persuade them to work together to overcome their difficulties. And what happened to him? Well, he barely won re-election in 1932, he was forcibly removed from office in 1934,

and he surely would have lost if he’d run for reelection again. In short, Germans of the 1930s were—by all evidence—no longer interested in a Roosevelt or Churchill-type leader with a positive message. They were so angry and frightened that they demanded a scapegoat.

Now, if it had been a demagogue other than Hitler, can we be sure that the chosen target would have been the Jewish people? I think that is quite likely, as well. Europe had (and has) a long history of anti-Jewish bigotry (the proper name for this, of course, is anti-Semitism). Why have Jews been targeted in this way? There are many reasons; I’ll limit myself to three of the most important:

1. Theological differences: Jews and Christians disagree on a very major theological question, namely whether or not Jesus was the messiah (savior) promised by the Bible. Christians say yes, Jews say no.
2. Jews are a small, identifiable minority: If it’s “us” vs. “them,” it works best if the “them” are obviously different from “us” (Jewish people wear different clothes than non-Jews, have different customs, eat different foods, etc.) and if the “them” are small enough in number to be bullied by “us.”
3. Banking: For many centuries, Christians (and Muslims, for that matter) were forbidden by their religion from practicing usury (the practice of lending money and charging interest). If you cannot engage in usury, you cannot be in the banking business, because charging interest on loans is how banks make money. The Jewish religion did not (and does not) forbid usury, and so Jewish people owned and operated the banks of Europe for hundreds of years. This made it possible to develop a false stereotype that “all Jews are rich” and also for Europeans to get into the habit of unfairly blaming economic downturns (like the one Germany was suffering in the 1920s and 1930s) on Jewish people and their banks.

Given these things, it is not surprising that Adolf Hitler chose Jewish people as his primary target, and it likely that any other demagogue that rose to power in Germany in the 1930s would have done much the same. And ultimately, whether my assumptions are correct or not, the important point is this: Adolf Hitler was very much a product of the political and economic and cultural circumstances of his time. If we want to understand why World War II (and the Holocaust) happened, it is more important to look at the events that took place at the end of World War I and to look at what was happening in German (and Japanese and Italian) society in the 1920s and 1930s, as opposed to focusing on Hitler himself.