

Hitler and His Critiques of the Treaty of Versailles

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Abstract

The Treaty of Versailles was designed to be the treaty to end all global conflicts. Sadly, not only did it fail to achieve its intended purpose, some might even argue that it catalyzed another catastrophic worldwide disaster. Despite the vast research by scholars around the world regarding the different criticisms that this treaty has faced, very little was focused on the man who ultimately started WWII, Adolf Hitler. This article will utilize Hitler's books and speeches throughout the 1920s and the 30s to explain the correlation between his criticisms and his road to power and addresses a common misconception regarding this controversial figure. This study will add nuance to our understanding of the already well-known Treaty, give us a fresh perspective on a seemingly conclusive topic, as well as teach us a lesson on things to avoid in future diplomatic negotiations.

Keywords

Nationalism, Hitler, Treaty of Versailles.

1. Introduction

The Treaty of Versailles, which put an end to the First World War, has been roundly critiqued by historians, economists, and politicians ever since it was signed. For example, we pay a great deal of attention to John Maynard Keynes and his insightful remarks as well as to the logical arguments of Sally Marks, and to the many others who have followed in their wake. And yet the most important critique of the Treaty was not an intellectual at all, or even a diplomat: it was simply a young Austrian soldier named Adolf Hitler. Hitler, however, is not often taken seriously in this regard. In this paper, I will be reconstructing Hitler's critique of the Treaty, proving how these arguments played an important role in his rise to power in a relatively divided nation, and explain why Hitler's argument supplements more well-known readings despite its controversy.

Before turning to Hitler, let us look at historical and contemporary critics of the Versailles Treaty so we can better understand the justice of Hitler's complaints. The economic policies of the Treaty of Versailles have been a controversial topic since its release in 1919. Due to the tremendous losses during the war and the fear of Germany becoming a powerful nation once again, the European victors, mainly France and Great Britain, demanded that Germany assume full responsibility for WWI and pay an immense amount in reparations. John M. Keynes, a prominent British economist, heavily criticized this aspect of the treaty. He argues in his book, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, that "The French and British peoples have run the risk of completing the ruin [of the European economic solidarity], which Germany began."

[1] Keynes's viewpoint attracted many supporters, including US president Woodrow Wilson. Wilson refined this theory and claimed that a huge reparation bill might lead to a resentful and economically hobbled Germany. As a result, the disordered society would seek a solution through means of violence and even Bolshevism. [2] Although both Keynes's and Wilson's

arguments were reasonable, their theory of minimal punishment for Germany was considered very radical at the time and was soon forsaken by the delegates.

While the overall effect of the treaty had never been linked with Hitler, the social problems resulting from the unfairness of the accord were touched upon by Sally Marks. Marks asserted that one of the catastrophic mistakes within Versailles was how the Allies largely ignored events and currents within Germany. With a newly formed, inexperienced Weimar Republic, Germany was in a very unstable condition. According to Marks, demanding that the new Weimar Republic be held accountable for disasters that they had never even been a part of, would foment hatred and frustration within society as the public would believe that the newly created democratic government would never advocate on behalf of the country they represented. Unfortunately, this idea was never thought of at the time of the conference, and Germany was forced to “accept the defeat, the Rhineland occupation, territorial loss, reparations, and disarmament.” [3] With the government failing to cope with both internal and external criticism, oppositions soon sprouted across the country, and pandemonium ensued.

We have primarily looked at Sally Marks’ argument on Germany’s social problems, but we should also take Adolf Hitler and his analysis of the Treaty of Versailles into account. In Hitler’s autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, he expressed clear discontent towards the Treaty. Hitler utilized the controversial boundary problem between Germany and France to claim that other nations were exploiting loopholes of the peace treaty and turning it against its original purpose. In 1923, the French army marched across the border into Ruhr and seized control of multiple towns. Because Germany was forced to demilitarize under the Treaty of Versailles, France’s attack faced no resistance. It should also be noted that during the French occupation in the Germanic territory, propaganda and fabricated brochures were delivered throughout the area, and local council representatives were paid to vote for “independence”. [4] It is believed that the real intention behind this attack was to take control of Ruhr, which was a highly industrialized city, and weaken Germany. This would help France’s civil and military reconstruction to occur much faster and at the same time further suppress Germany’s national needs. [5] Hitler argued that taking part of his nation’s territory would violate the Treaty of Versailles’ initial motif of resolving world crisis through the means of peace rather than violence, as this attack left many Germans feeling terrorized upon seeing their fellow citizens taken away by the enemy through forceful means during a time of peace and reconstruction. [6] Furthermore, France had set a dangerous precedent for other nations. If Ruhr was able to be conquered with no resistance for a large amount of profit, other European countries would soon copy this tactic and dismantle Germany completely for resources and money. Hitler realized that it is “absurd to enter into negotiations without having organized the necessary force as a support [to enforce the delivery of the treaty]”. [7] With this in mind, the seed of revenge for this level of humiliation for Germany was planted in the heart of Hitler, and he began to incorporate the idea of remilitarizing Germany in his speeches. By analyzing Hitler’s actions after he took office in 1933 and comparing it to his promises as written in his autobiography, we can say that France’s action ultimately paved the way for Germany’s rapid pre-war expansion.

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler heavily argued that the Treaty of Versailles created a divided Germany and deeply hurt the nationalistic spirit of the entire German population. After WWI, with the ambition of helping Germany’s reconstruction process, external influences flooded the nation and tried to claim their spots in the newly formed Republic. Soon, more than 40 political parties and organizations, ranging across the entirety of the political spectrum, were established within Germany. As the political system matured in the early 1920s, many groups started to take the moral high ground and use the influence of the media to falsely accuse others of wrongdoings. This led to an already weak Germany becoming even more fragile as people took to blaming, and sometimes even killing, each other for political purposes. [8] Hitler was enraged after seeing the general public gradually losing themselves in these new political movements. He

argued that it is depressing and unacceptable to see that Germans were now united under different parties for the fulfillment of their individual beliefs rather than fighting on behalf of their beloved nation. [9] Intending to revitalize the German spirit that had been under the foreign influence for nearly a decade, Hitler and the Nazi party promised to reunite Germany under their control. Thus, after he acquired power in 1933, opposing politicians were categorized as traitors of Germany and many were exiled or placed in jail for their crimes. To a certain extent, Hitler's later idea of clearing out non-patriotic individuals within German society through the means of the brutal Holocaust began here.

Likewise, Hitler expressed similar arguments regarding the Treaty of Versailles during his speeches in the 1920s and 30s. But in contrast to Mein Kampf's clear political agenda, the Treaty of Versailles was often used as a means to gather support and to publicize his ideas. For example, during one of the speeches delivered by Hitler in August of 1923, Hitler repeatedly challenged his supporters to be brave, and threatened that "Either Germany sinks, and we through our despicable cowardice sink with it, or else we dare to enter on the fight against death and devil and rise up against the fate that has been planned for us." [10] From constantly reminding the public that the future of their country is perilous during the speech and claiming that the Treaty of Versailles was a tremendous lie, Hitler used his arguments to actively encourage the public to follow his ideologies. Similarly, to attract the support of the upper class within Germany during his speeches on the 10th and the 27th of April, 1923, Hitler heavily criticized the fast-rising communist party within the nation. The communist party was largely disliked by the upper class, and Hitler used this opportunity to use the communist party as a scapegoat. He claimed that during the world war, soldiers sacrificed their lives and fought relentlessly for every inch of territory, but now, these communist groups were taking all of this for granted and trying to negotiate with other countries by ceding territories and paying indemnities in return for receiving supports. [11] [12] After seeing Hitler's well-rounded plan of reuniting Germany and recognizing his intolerant attitude towards property redistribution and communism, wealthy industrialists and large companies gave Hitler enormous support. They would eventually play a very large role in helping him to spread his ideology, supplying him with large amounts of funding, and aiding the reconstruction of Germany under Hitler's rule. [13] It is inarguable that without the strong determination Hitler expressed through his speeches in his early years, these upper-class businessmen would have already found other political support within the government, and Hitler's road towards becoming the leader of Germany would be much more difficult, perhaps even impossible.

Throughout his documented written work, Hitler completely ignored the economic factors within the Treaty of Versailles. This was perhaps due to Hitler not being an economist himself. The economic advisor of the Nazi Party, Wilhelm Kepper, did not join the party until the late 1920s. [14] Instead, as we saw, Hitler primarily focused on the social problems of the Treaty of Versailles. From analyzing his talks about the fragmented Weimar Republic and the weak national spirit due to divided political parties caused by the treaty, we can see that Hitler's concern towards the future of Germany was very similar to Sally Marks' critique as mentioned previously. While Marks ended her argument here and started talking about her other psychological, economic, and political reasonings, Hitler, who was an ambitious politician, took a step further and thought about a response to the dire situation: he had to reunite the entirety of Germany again through forceful means. Looking further ahead in the Nazi regime, we can see that this plan will be at the center of Hitler's ultimate goal of creating a pan-Germanic Empire. Likewise, Hitler's argument about the Treaty of Versailles being filled with ambiguities and bias against Germany was unique on its own. He was the only critic that analyzed the French invasion of Ruhr thoroughly and utilized it within his argument. But unfortunately, Hitler's beliefs were never internationally recognized by intellectuals.

To many people, a very interesting question arises: If Hitler's argument was distinctive in its own way, why were Hitler and his doctrines rarely utilized by historians as evidence? We can answer this question very easily: Hitler often changed his ideologies on a whim, and he attracted most of his followers through the political devices he used within his speeches regarding Versailles rather than providing them with actual analysis. When France and Britain decided to follow an appeasement policy in the mid-1930s, Hitler continually changed his political agendas. He was constantly aiming to get his goals accomplished, and he decided that it was best to keep pursuing his objectives one after another. Recognizing and giving in to Hitler's demands served to boost his confidence in his radical ideologies and paved the way for Hitler's ever more unreasonable terms and conditions. Thus, to many scholars, it would be unjustifiable to classify Hitler as a thinker and use his arguments as supporting evidence. Furthermore, by comparing the copies of *Mein Kampf* sold within the first few years of its original release and the number of attendees of Hitler's speeches, we can see that Hitler gained much more support through his rallies around Germany compared to readers of his book. [15] [16] However, as mentioned in the previous section of this paper, Hitler only utilized the Treaty of Versailles in his addresses as a tool to gather support while all the real analysis lied deeply within his autobiography. By using this important comparison, we can come to the verdict that Hitler was not a very astute analyst of the treaty. He gained support only from people who were harmed by the cruelty of the treaty as his alluring speeches quelled the trauma within those individuals. With both reasons mentioned above, many researchers of the Treaty of Versailles over the last century believed that using Hitler's reasonings would decrease the validity of their studies and greatly avoided using these unfounded statements.

Nevertheless, Hitler's argument should still be taken into account for such studies as we need to give him credit for being the only person daring to stand out against the Treaty of Versailles in uncertain times and successfully keeping his promises after taking office. History is a heavily opinionated subject where all researchers are welcome to contribute their ideas in order to seek the truth. Hitler and his arguments should not be discriminated against just because of his fickle desires or for his relatively dull arguments compared to other historians. With an already well-written analysis, there is no doubt that if Sally Marks were to include Hitler's important arguments regarding the Treaty of Versailles in her published studies, she would be able to produce a more refined and conclusive journal article.

Despite advocating in favor of Hitler's critique in this circumstance, I am in no way arguing that he was a great person. Rather, we need to learn from Hitler's road to power, which brought dire consequences to our entire world. Although he went on to become someone who would forever be condemned by society, he was not wrong in his critique of the Treaty of Versailles and how it left the Germans feeling powerless, worthless, and hopeless. Had the authors of the treaty thought about the various social arguments that Hitler would eventually make, there might have existed a situation where Hitler's captivating speeches did not resonate with the German people, thus evading the need for another devastating World War completely. As history has the tendency to repeat itself over and over again, it is very important that we recognize and be alarmed about similar trends of extremists using radical ideas as a tool to achieve their political agendas. We know all too well that once a madman takes control over a nation, there is no turning back; only tragedy ensues.

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