

## **Hitler's Vienna Experiences**

**By Walter S. Zapotoczny**

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany and Nazi dictator. According to Robert Payne, the key aspects of Hitler's character were formed in the years he spent in Vienna. While in Vienna Hitler read anti-Semitic literature that complained about the Jews. Hitler was influenced by several philosophers like Georg von Schönerer whose ideology was anti-liberal, anti-socialistic and anti-Catholic. Hitler was influenced by German nationalist von Schönerer who opposed the ruling Austrian monarchy. Another key influence was that of the Mayor of Vienna, Karl Lueger, who promoted anti-Semitism. A third person of influence was Robert Wagner and his operas. Hitler was fascinated by their Germanic music and tales of struggles. The answer to what influenced Hitler's thinking that caused him to destroy Europe and kill millions of people may never be completely answered. However, it is clear that many of his ideas were formulated by his experiences during his time in Vienna. Hitler wrote often that his views about the Jews, German identity and National Socialism began as a young man in Vienna. To a large extent, his ideas were formulated in Vienna, Austria during the time he spent there from 1907 to 1913.

Adolf Hitler was born in *Braunau am Inn*, Austria on April 20, 1889. According to Ian Kershaw, the young Adolf Hitler was moody and became hostile towards his father Alois when the family moved to Linz. Hitler initially wanted to be a priest but moved to Vienna, Austria in 1907 to pursue training at the Viennese Academy of Fine Arts. He was turned down for admission twice, an experience embittered him. Hitler remained in Vienna living off a small inheritance and what he could earn selling his art. He moved from hostel to hostel, roaming the street. This paper will argue that it was during this period, from 1907 to 1913, that Hitler would develop his views on Jews, German nationalism and Socialism. He rose to become Chancellor of Germany by being the leader of the authoritarian Nazi party. In Vienna he developed a strong hatred of both the Jews and Communists. He seized power by using constitutional means and violence. He used oratory skills to convince the German people to rise up against the Jews and Communists. According to Kershaw, Hitler wanted to create a new German Reich that would last 1,000 years. Hitler's rise to power started in 1924 when Hitler re-established the National Socialist German Workers Party. The party is commonly known as the Nazi Party. Nazi Germany, under Hitler's leadership, was responsible for the murder of over six million Jews in Europe. When Hitler left his birthplace of Linz, Austria, he decided to go to Vienna, the seat of the Hapsburg Empire.

The views of Hitler began from his early childhood and particularly the times spent in Vienna. In his book *The Life and Death of Adolf Hitler* Robert Payne gives us some insight into Hitler's mind:

From a very early age he was at the mercy of his dreams, August Kubizek, who knew him in his youth, has described how Hitler wandered through the streets of Linz, dreaming of the day when he raze the city to the ground and create it anew in a shape more to his liking. Even then there was a terrifying urgency in his voice. When he went to live in Vienna, he was full of plans for destroying it and rebuilding it.

Hitler saw the Jews as an affluent sect of people, distinct from the hard working Germans and Austrians. Hence the stereotyping was formed from early days. In some regards he was already on the path of hating the Jews and communists by the time his years in Vienna ended. Hitler believed that foreign elements were intentionally and systematically destroying the German nationality of Austria. Hitler came to believe that Hapsburg Imperialism was the cause of this loss of German identity.

There is ample evidence to suggest that Hitler's ideas of anti-Semitism, nationalism and his views on socialism were influenced by his experiences during the time he spent in Vienna, Austria. Those experiences are explored in this paper by examining the various writers, politicians and philosophers that Hitler encountered as a young man wandering the street of Vienna. An impressionable and intelligent young man, Hitler absorbed the German nationalistic, anti-Semitic and socialist experiences of his time in Vienna to blend them into what would later be called National Socialism as he attempted to create a Third Reich in Germany.

This paper examines the works of Walter Frank, Richard Geehr, Ian Kershaw, Brigitte Hamann, Sydney Jones, Hans Mommsen, Jeremy Noakes, Robert Payne, Guido Von List and Hitler's own words in *Mein Kampf* to examine how his experiences as a youth in Vienna, Austria influenced his ideas about anti-Semitism and nationalism and socialism. This paper will first look the factors and people who helped shape Hitler's anti-Semitic views beginning with his decision to move to Vienna, his application to the Viennese Academy of Fine Arts and his exposure to several influential politicians. Next, we examine the German nationalistic fervor in the Vienna of Hitler's youth and this fervor and several politicians that influenced his nationalistic ideas, including the writing of Guido von List. Finally, Hitler's exposure to the government of Vienna, Prussian traditions and political influences are considered as we look at how these influences affected his Socialist ideas.

### **How Hitler's experience in Vienna influence his anti-Semitic ideas**

Adolf Hitler was born into a middle-class family. He was the son of civil servant in Linz, Austria who died when the young Adolf was fourteen. Hitler had very little contact with Jews while living in Linz. At seventeen years old, Hitler traveled to Vienna and took the entrance exam to the Vienna Academy of Arts. He failed to gain acceptance to the Academy but resided there from February 1908 to May 1913. Hitler wandered the streets listening to the political conversation of anti-government politicians. Hitler began to experience poverty at the end of 1909, as he spent the inheritance left to him by his family. During that winter his received some money from his aunt and was able to secure a job painting watercolors for tourists. According to Jeremy Noakes, the middle-class German nationals of the time held anti-Semitic views. It is likely that Hitler also shared those views, according to Noakes. He did, however, have cautious personal and business associations with Jews in Vienna and occasionally depended on them to make his living as they brokered his art.

According to Jeremy Noakes, it would be highly unlikely that while Hitler was in Vienna that he had not studied anti-Semitism. The four politicians who Hitler described as his models were Georg von Schönerer, Karl Lueger, Karl Hermann Wolf, and Franz Stein. Each of these men was

a radical anti-Jew. Evidence shows that during his time in Vienna, Hitler read many anti-Semitic newspapers and studied anti-Semitic pamphlets that were freely distributed. Hitler writes about the development of his anti-Semitic views in *Mein Kampf*:

For me, this was a time of the greatest spiritual upheaval I have ever had to go through. I had ceased to be a weak-kneed cosmopolitan and became an anti-Semite. Vienna, he said, had significantly contributed to his becoming anti-Semitic, "At the time of this bitter struggle between spiritual education and cold reason, the visual instruction of the Vienna streets had performed invaluable services.

In *Mein Kampf* Hitler writes about an encounter he had with an Eastern Jew. He described him as a strange creature, having black hair lock wearing a full-length garment. He questioned if this person was a Jew and a German. Hitler claims that this experience started him reading about the subject of the Jew. He writes about the encounter in *Mein Kampf*:

Since I had begun to concern myself with this question and to take cognizance of the Jews, Vienna appeared to me in a different light than before. Wherever I went, I began to see Jews, and the more I saw, the more sharply they became distinguished in my eyes from the rest of humanity...when I recognized the Jew as the leader of the Social Democracy, the scales dropped from my eyes. A long soul struggle had reached its conclusion.

According to Walter Frank, Karl Lueger, the mayor of Vienna from 1895 to 1910, was key influence of Hitler. Lueger promoted anti-Semitism and promoted stereotypes about the Jews. He cast them as enemies of the state and of a lower class. Dr. Lueger understood the tremendous power within the German community of promoting Germanic tradition along with importance of the soil.

The Germans who believed they were not truly represented in Austrian politics migrated to Lueger's ideas; one such convert was the young Adolf Hitler. According to Frank, Hitler began to think the Jew and the Socialist were one in the same. If the "poison of free enterprise could be eliminated," Lueger pointed out, the "Jewish problem" would not exist. Almost penniless in 1909, Hitler walked around Vienna sleeping in taverns and wherever he could. According to Jones, Hitler saw the newspapers portray the Jew as a scapegoat for the troubles of the country.

### **How Hitler's experience in Vienna influenced his nationalist ideas**

There is also evidence that as with Hitler's ideas about anti-Semitism were influenced by people and events in Vienna, so were his nationalistic ideas. Two German nationalist politicians were of particular influence. In *The Third Reich between Vision and Reality: New Perspectives on German History 1918-1945* Hans Mommsen writes:

Two German nationalist politicians turned out to be especially important for the emerging political concepts of Hitler. The first was Karl Hermann Wolf, the leader of the German Radical Party. He became widely known for successfully disrupting parliamentary proceedings by violent methods. Wolf was the outstanding hero in the

German-Czech street battles in Prague and in Vienna, and did not hesitate to advocate the use of violence in political strife. Another model was Franz Stein, the leader of the German Workers Party, which belonged to the Austrian pan-German movement. Stein was regarded as an embittered enemy of the allegedly 'Jewish' international Social Democrats.

In Hitler's childhood, the concept of nationalism was present. The Austrian people living along the border with Germany considered themselves to be German. While they lived under the Austrian Hapsburg Monarchy, they stated their loyalty to the Germany and the Kaiser. Hitler writes in *Mein Kampf* that he and his young associates in Vienna were fond of using the German greeting 'Heil,' and singing the Germany national anthem instead of the Austrian national anthem.

Even while Hitler pursued his dream of being an artist, he continued to express his passion for the German culture. Hitler wondered why other countries could not be like Germany. Hitler had a passion for reading, looking at all the daily newspapers on hand, reading many political pamphlets and reading lots of books from the Vienna library on German mythology and German history. Hitler was very interested in history as a young man. In *Mein Kampf* he wrote, "By far my best subjects were geography and, even more so, general history. These were my two favorite subjects, and I led the class in them." Hitler also had a history teacher in school that inspired him with the tales of Bismarck and Frederick the Great. The young Hitler professed his loyalty to the German Kaiser while his father worked as an Austrian customs agent. Nationalism became an obsession for Hitler. In *Hitler's Vienna: A Dictator's Apprenticeship* Brigitte Hamann writes,

Vienna of 1908-1913 left a strong impact on Hitler, most especially in his understanding of pan-Germanism and the belief that only if the German people having a strong and unified culture and political autonomy could the German people be strong, long-lasting and fulfill their destiny.

Another influence on Hitler came in the form of the operas of German composer Richard Wagner. After seeing his first opera in Vienna, Hitler was instantly transfixed by the German music, pagan myths and the tales of kings and knights. Hitler followed the character of Wagner as they struggled against their enemies, scene after scene. Hitler viewed the great achievements of the Viennese arts, poetry, theater and sciences as possible because of the German people, who brought them with them. The concept of nationalism began to take shape for Hitler as he moved around Vienna and considered these things. In *Mein Kampf* he wrote:

Ten million people cannot permanently hold together a state of fifty million composed of different and conflicting nationalities, unless certain definite pre-requisite conditions are at hand while there is still time to avail of them. In such circumstances the country must be governed and administered by strictly adhering to principle of uniformity. Uniformity in nationalism constitutes homogenous ethnicity, cultural similarity and common purpose is the glue to the German society.

Hitler was extremely inquisitive and studied the idealistic works of Hegel, Nietzsche, Treitschke, Fichte, and Houston Stewart Chamberlain. He took pieces from the writings of these individuals and others and came up with his own nationalistic philosophy in *Mein Kampf*. According to Walter Frank, the two political movements that influenced Hitler the most were those of Georg von Schönerer and Karl Lueger. Schönerer was more comfortable with debating while Lueger was at home with big crowd on the street. Hitler's ideology came in part from Schönerer while his strategy and tactics came from Lueger. Lueger was admired by Hitler for his skills in speech-making and for his use of propaganda in getting popular support. Lueger had a skill for manipulating reputable organizations like the Catholic Church. Hitler admired this and studied Lueger's techniques, using many of them later.

In Vienna, Hitler's idea of what the nation should look like ethnically began to come into focus. He believed the state was a *volkic* (people's) organization. This idea is later exemplified in a speech he made before the Munich court in 1924. He said:

What is the state? Today the state is an economic organization, an association of persons, formed, it would seem, for the sole purpose that all should cooperate in securing each other's daily bread. The state, however, is not an economic organization, it is a *volkic* organization. The purpose, the aim of the state is to provide the people with its food-supply and with the position of power in the world which is its due.

### **How Hitler's experience in Vienna influenced his socialist ideas**

Young Adolf Hitler's first understanding of how government affects people's lives was probably first that of his father's and then based on what he saw in Vienna, Austria. According to Hamann, Hitler's political point of view was also influenced while he was in Vienna not only by German folklore but also by specific Austrian activities that offered various political attitudes, particularly those of pan-Germanic expansionism and National Socialism, which had German roots. Hitler's understanding of National Socialism can, in part, be traced to the Prussian traditions Bismarck and Frederick the Great. These traditions describe and promote the concept of a super race. In *Das Geheimnis der Runen, Vienna 1907* Guido von List writes:

To it [Prussian traditions] was added the tradition of political romanticism, with its sharp hostility to rationalism and to the principles underlying the French Revolution, its emphasis on instinct and the past, and its proclamation of the rights of Friedrich Nietzsche's exceptional individual the *Übermensch* [Superman] over all universal law and rules. These two traditions were later reinforced by the 19th-century adoration of science and of the laws of nature, which seemed to operate independently of all concepts of good and evil.

According to Hamann, further strengthening for Hitler ideas came from such 19th-century academic scholars such as Richard Wagner and Houston Stewart Chamberlain. Both of these philosophers influenced Hitler's early nationalistic ideas through their assertions of the superiority of the German peoples above all other Europeans and all additional races. Brigitte Hamann writes in *Hitler's Vienna: A Dictator's Apprenticeship* that Hitler read Guido von List's work extensively and owned at least one of his books. List's work appeared in many pro-

German newspapers. Von List came up with the phrase "blond-haired, blue-eyed Aryan." Hamann argues that Hitler believed the Aryans were destined to rule the world.

Hitler's political-socialist ideas began to take shape while in Vienna. Hitler was forced to live in a homeless shelter after falling into poverty. He came to the conclusion that the government had not provided a proper social welfare system. Hitler rejected Marxism, but adopted socialistic ideas that eventually would become his own political-economic theories.

One of Hitler's greatest experiences that influenced his socialist ideas was his understanding and admiration of Karl Lueger, mayor of Vienna. The political model of Lueger's Christian Socialist Party professed the industrial and economic advancement of all people as its basis. Lueger's success in Vienna greatly influenced Hitler. Under Lueger, Vienna tripled in size and realized perfection in municipal organization. Lueger used ceremonies for his own political ends. To Hitler, this success was a model for the world. The Christian Socialist Party thought of itself as the part to serve the needs of the lower middle class using slogans that were anti-capitalistic and anti-liberal. In *Mein Kampf* Hitler writes about Lueger:

At all events, these occasions slowly made me acquainted with the man and the movement, which in those days guided Vienna's destiny: Dr. Karl Lueger, I, and the Christian Social Party. When I arrived in Vienna, I was hostile to both of them. The man and the movement seemed 'reactionary' in my eyes. My common sense of justice, however, forced me to change this judgment in proportion as I had occasion to become acquainted with the man and his work; and slowly my fair judgment turned to unconcealed admiration. Today, more than ever, I regard this man as the greatest German mayor of all times. How many of my basic principles were upset by this change in my attitude toward the Christian Social movement!

Having attained a reputation as a municipal reformer, Lueger had the legal and political knowledge and organizational skills that Hitler eventually copied. Lueger was very aware of the importance of schools and their long-term usefulness for political gain, a fact not lost on Hitler. Lueger was quoted as saying:

The influence which the *Volksschullehrer* (primary school teacher) had on the voters in the simple rural communities was and will always remain important, for these teachers are in continuous contact with single families, often act as community secretary, are advisors in this or that capacity and represent, next to the priest and he curate, the intelligentsia of the little community. The party that has the priest and teacher on its side will win political elections.

Based on his following of Karl Lueger, Hitler came to the conclusion that the democratic process he witnessed in the Austrian Parliament was a negative influence on the character of human. Hitler came to believe that the press, which was mostly owned by Jews, hides the truth from the citizens of Austria. Hitler viewed Parliament as spending most of their time quibbling over how to favor the majority, ignoring the minority German ethnic population. The Vienna that Hitler experienced was that of disadvantaged people, of the homeless and hungry and of poverty and isolation. The people who Hitler associated saw the Austrian government as too

Jewish, too cosmopolitan and decaying. Lueger provided an alternative with his Christian Social movement.

## **Conclusion**

Hitler moved to Vienna in 1907 to become an art student. After failing the entrance exams to the Vienna Academy of Arts, he was left to wander the streets and contemplate politics and German nationalism. The young Hitler read as much as he could about politics, German mythology and was fascinated by the operas of Robert Wagner, transfixed by the German music, pagan myths and the tales of kings and knights. He followed with great enthusiasm Wagner's heroes as they struggled against their enemies. He studied the nationalistic and anti-Semitic philosophy of Georg von Schönerer Karl Hermann Wolf and Franz Stein. He began to admire the management and organizational skills of Karl Lueger's Social Democratic Party and its socialistic views.

It is clear that he admired the Social Democrats and their use of fear and propaganda for political gain. Hitler studied the works of Guido von List identifying with its Prussian identity and their right to rule the world. He read the works of Hegel, Nietzsche, Treitschke, Fichte and Houston Stewart Chamberlain taking bits and pieces of their philosophies to come up with his own nationalistic, anti-Semitic and socialist philosophy. In Vienna, Hitler was transformed into an intense nationalist. In *Mein Kampf* Hitler discusses how he acquired a foundation for his thoughts in Vienna.

Hitler would write later that when he departed Vienna he had become to understand the problem of the Jew. He had become an anti-Marxist and developed a strong pro-German sentiment. He developed a strong sense of Social Darwinism and absorbed many of the philosophies that he was exposed to. Based on Hitler experiences in Vienna he would later call for increased spending on social welfare programs. He promoted job creation and for business owners to pay more to the state. He championed the rebuilding of the German military and resented the reparation demands made in the Treaty of Versailles while re-building the German military, creating jobs in the war industries.

Adopting ideas used by Karl Lueger's in Vienna, the Nazis Party would run soup kitchens, organize youth programs and revamp the German education system. His message resonated with the German people. Hitler's experiences in Vienna influenced his anti-Semitic, nationalist and socialist ideas and provided the foundation for the creation of the National Socialist German Workers Party. Hitler would use the Nazi Party to win the chancellorship of Germany and to carry out his plan for the Germanic domination. Hitler would use what he learned in Vienna to justify the extermination of the European Jews, the annexation of Austria, the invasion of Europe and the eventual destruction of Germany.

It seems obvious that Hitler not only discovered anti-Semitic vocabulary in Vienna, but mastered it. Hitler's anti-Semitism ideas developed from his experiences in Vienna. It is clear that Hitler's experiences with the ideas and actions of Georg von Schönerer, Karl Lueger, Karl Hermann Wolf, and Franz Stein in Vienna influenced his anti-Semitic ideas. During this time in

Vienna, Hitler's ideas of the Jews became clear and his prejudices grew. Hitler wondered why other countries could not be like Germany. This theme would be carried out later as he went on to create the Third Reich. This would later be his essential idea of nationalistic racial discrimination and the belief in the intrinsic superiority of the German nation and culture.

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