

Karl Haushofer: One of the More Important Persons to Influence the Events That Led to WWII and the Holocaust

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Abstract

German dictator Adolf Hitler is widely regarded as the most evil man who has ever lived. To make the point that someone is very evil, you would compare him to Hitler. Yet Hitler was only following the teachings of his mentor, Karl Ernst Haushofer, and Haushofer's disciples, including Rudolf Hess and a few other academics and scholars. Munich professor Haushofer and Hitler's personal political aide, Hess played a critical role in forming the central ideas in Hitler's manifesto. *Mein Kampf*, in turn, was the blueprint that Hitler used to rule during his regime. Furthermore, the Nazi Party very closely followed his manifesto, which produced the Holocaust and World War II. Through Darwin's German disciple Ernest Haeckel, Charles Darwin was a critical influence for both Haushofer and Hess, as well as Hitler. Haushofer's influence also was critical in Japan's involvement in WWII.

Keywords: Karl Ernst Haushofer, WWII, Hitler, Darwinism, Ernest Haeckel, Charles Darwin, Eugenics, Rudolf Hess, Karl Lueger, Lebensraum, Lanz von Liebenfels

Introduction

University of Munich Professor Karl Ernst Haushofer (1869–1946) (fig. 1) was one of the most important originators of the ideas that culminated in WWII (Low 1996). In 1919, Haushofer met a university student named Rudolf Hess. Hess joined the Nazi Party, which was founded in early 1919. In 1920, Haushofer and his student, Hess (fig. 2),



Dr. Karl v. Haushofer.

Fig. 1. Professor Karl Haushofer. Theodor Mayerhofer. “Karl von Haushofer aus Zeitschrift des Deutschen und Oesterreichischen Alpenvereins 1894 Band 25,” https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karl_von_Haushofer.jpg. CC BY-SA 4.0.

developed an intense teacher-student relationship based on their common war experiences and radical postwar political views. Both Haushofer and Hess uncritically accepted Darwin's worldview applied to society, and successfully implemented it into the overriding German Nazi policy (Haushofer 2002, 77).

It was through Hess that Haushofer met Adolf Hitler (Haushofer 2002, ix). Hitler (fig. 3) had “become familiar with radical social Darwinism through [reading] the pulp fiction of his early days in Vienna—by Lanz von Liebenfels, Georg von Schönerer, and Karl Lueger, among others” (Herwig 2016, 104). From his reading, around 1907 Hitler embraced in Vienna what Low described as “a crude hackneyed Darwinism” not the form one would read in an academic genetics textbook. This would form the foundation of his thought, especially his views on Lebensraum (Low 1996, 3). It was not only Haushofer that influenced Hitler, but among those who “read Haeckel was the young Adolf Hitler, who would select precisely what he wanted from Social Darwinist thought” that was found in Haeckel (Remak 1990, 3). The central Nazi ideology “was based on racial superiority in which the Jews—and other groups, including the Roma—would be killed” (Holmes 2023, 34). And the core of that racial superiority ideology was Social Darwinism.

Later, Haushofer visited Hess in Landsberg Prison where both Hitler and Hess were serving time for their involvement in the November 8, 1923, failed coup. During the summer and fall of 1924, Haushofer spent many Wednesdays holding seminar-style lectures with the two inmates. As a result, Hitler later claimed that “Landsberg was my university [education] at state expense” (Herwig 2016, xiv). Although Hitler embraced the idea of Lebensraum

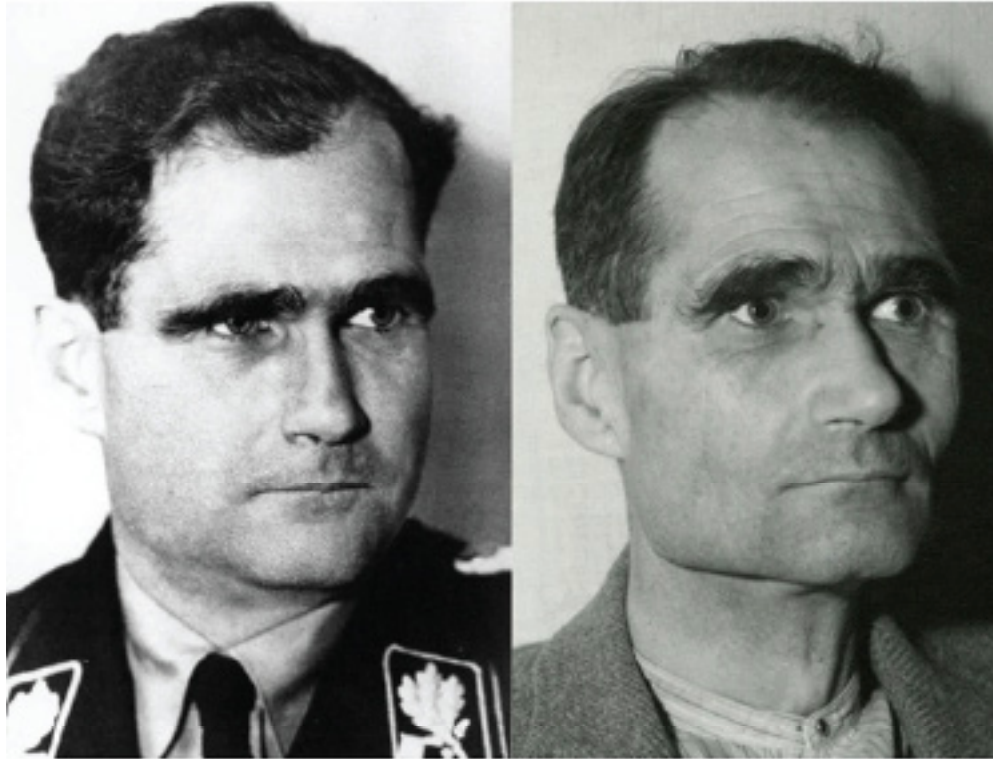


Fig. 2. Rudolf Hess 1933 and 1945 showing how the war had aged him. Bundesarchiv, Bild 146II-849. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rudolf_Hess_1933_and_1945.jpg. CC-BY-SA 3.0.

before 1924, when Haushofer met with him in Landsberg, he reinforced this worldview in Hitler's mind (Weikart 2006, 161–162).



Fig. 3. Adolf Hitler. Kentot785, “Colorised photograph of Adolf Hitler.” <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Adolf-hitler-medium.jpg>. CC BY-SA 4.0.

Unfortunately, Hitler rarely acknowledged the influence of others on his thinking. This possibly was because he wanted to give the impression that his ideas originated from his own genius (Herwig 2016, xiv). One exception was Richard Wagner, whom Hitler openly credited for some of his [Hitler's] conclusions. Nonetheless, astute historians have documented that most of Hitler's main ideas and political beliefs came from others, including Hess and Haushofer.

No one is claiming that “Haushofer was the ghostwriter of *Mein Kampf*, but rather...both men [Hitler and Haushofer] shared a certain mind-set, one set in the social Darwinism of the latter half of the nineteenth century” (Herwig 2016, 104). Hess, though, did help Hitler write *Mein Kampf* when they both were serving prison terms for the 1923 Nazi failed coup. *Mein Kampf* became the Nazi Bible that outlined Nazi goals and policy. Specifically, Hess took dictation from Hitler, and filled in many of the gaps in Hitler's education, as did university professor Karl Haushofer (Barnes and Abrahamsson 2015). The meetings between the three men were intensive:

Haushofer travelled the 100km from Munich to Landsberg on Wednesdays between 24th June and 12th November 1924. In sessions both in the morning and the afternoon he instructed Hitler and Hess. This included readings in philosophy from Nietzsche and Marx, in military studies from Bismarck and von Clausewitz, and in political geography and

geopolitics from Ratzel, Kjellén, and Haushofer's own works, especially Dai Nihon, and essays from a newly founded journal edited by Haushofer and others, *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*. (Barnes and Abrahamsson 2015)

"Geopolitik" science was the name given to the study of the geographic influences on power relationships in international relations. Geopolitik science's main contribution in Nazi Germany was Darwinian Lebensraum, German for "living space." Lebensraum was based on the idea that racially superior people have a moral obligation to confiscate the land of inferior peoples. This idea was translated into the idea that a stronger nation has a right to take possession of, by force if necessary, territory that the stronger nation considers to be necessary for its survival. Herwig summarized that, in Nazi Germany, "Charles Darwin's concept of the 'struggle for survival' for Ratzel came down to a 'struggle for space'" meaning land (Herwig 2016, 96).

Haushofer, although not the father of Geopolitik theory, "was responsible for making the term [and the concept] a household word in Germany" (Low 1996, 25). Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* "so that the basic elements of the Nazi Doctrine would be set down for all time to be disseminated uniformly and coherently" in Nazi's future, which Hitler predicted would last a thousand years (Bendersky 2021, 28). It lasted 12 years. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler justified the war to achieve "German expansionism using Lebensraum, one of Haushofer's key ideas" (Barnes and Abrahamsson 2015). In support of this view, *The History Channel* DVD on Haushofer opined that the influence of Haushofer was critical in Hitler's ascent to becoming the most powerful man in Germany. From Haushofer, Hitler earned the title *Führer* which means leader. Although this term was used during the Nazi period to apply to many types of leaders, when applied to Hitler, it took on the connotation of THE leader, meaning that every party member must obey only the Führer.

The Contribution of Social Darwinist Friedrich Ratzel

Haushofer was greatly influenced by the renowned University of Munich professor, geographer, and ethnographer, Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904). Darwinian evolutionary beliefs, in turn, widely influenced liberal nineteenth century German thought, particularly the work of Ratzel and his formulation of the Lebensraum concept (Abrahamsson 2013). Haushofer also later began teaching at the University of Munich, and was made a Professor in 1933.

Ratzel, in turn, was very influenced by the evolutionary theories of both Darwin and those of

one of his (Ratzel's) professors, German zoologist and committed Darwinist, Ernst Haeckel (Smith 1980). Haeckel, a leading German evolutionist, was a best-selling author who played a central role in spreading the gospel of Darwinism in both German academia and among the common people (Gliboff 2008). Ratzel's writings displayed an "uncritical acceptance of Darwin's main concepts and an obvious reliance on the views of Haeckel" (Beckinsale 2007).

Ratzel even published a book titled *Being and Becoming*, written to educate the common people about Darwinism (Weikart 2003, 278). In fact, at the book's heart "lay Ratzel's version of a vulgarized Darwinism—'survival of the fittest' in a world of finite arable land and exploding populations" (Herwig 2016, 113). Ratzel's view was that it was not wrong or immoral to take the land of weaker people, such as Slavs, but rather doing so was in harmony with the "law of nature."

Lebensraum

To Haushofer, war was a "struggle for elbow room," which was "the last great test of a nation's right to exist" and the "ultimate arbiter" of relations between nations (Herwig 2016, 100). The Lebensraum concept was "a critical component in the Nazi worldview that drove both its military conquests and racial policy" (Holocaust Museum 2022). The 1939 invasion of Poland, which formally began WWII, was the result of a direct application of this Lebensraum belief (Piotrowski 1997). Then, in 1941, the invasion of Russia was one of the more tragic applications of this ideology in terms of lives lost.

The end result of this belief was World War II which, in addition to taking the lives of close to 50 million people, was the most expensive war in history (Weatherford 2009, 249). Hitler was confident that the superior German race would prevail against Russia because the Russians were an inferior Slavic people. Adolf Hitler and Nazi racial theorists considered the Slavs as *Untermenschen* (subhumans); they were viewed as an inferior race that could not create civilization and were actually a danger to it (Bendersky 2021, 151). As Lund University Professor Christian Abramsson wrote, the key event in shaping German Lebensraum

was the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. Of particular interest here is the fact that *The Origin of Species* appeared in German translation in 1860, just months after the original book was published. The publication of *The Origin of Species* didn't go unnoticed by the younger generation of German geographers at the time. Oscar Peschel, Ratzel's predecessor at the chair of geography

in Leipzig, began promoting Darwinian ideas immediately after *Origin of Species* appeared, most noticeably in a review in the journal for which he was the editor at the time, *Das Ausland*. Here Peschel develops the [concept of]...Lebensraum in order to translate Darwin's hypothesis into geographical terms. For Peschel the notion of Lebensraum drew attention to the fact that, according to him, natural selection was already a telluric selection...the reception of Darwinian thought into the German sphere was widely divergent. (Abrahamsson 2013, 38)

Evolutionary theory in German thought also led to the widespread rejection of Christian monogenism (the idea that all humans are the progeny of Adam and Eve) and the widespread acceptance of polygenism (humans evolved from a wide variety of pre-humans). Although Lebensraum and natural selection were important persuasions, an "equally important, dividing line concerning the reception of Darwinism was that between monogenism—positing a common ancestry of man—and polygenism—positing that the races of man are of different lineages" (Abrahamsson 2013, 38).

Furthermore, Haushofer also believed that his geopolitical theory applied to "the study of Darwinian natural selection as it related to specific areas such as blood, race, genetic inheritance, ancestral land and culture" (Herwig 2016, 126). Along this line, the experiments on inmates in the concentration camps had "the goal to demonstrate not merely the superiority of Aryan genetics but also the inferiority of Jewish genetics" (Cussans 2020, 84).

The rapid acceptance of evolution, specifically the Darwinism form and its translation into geographical, academic, and political thought, in major ways radicalized Germany. This acceptance in academia also worked to reward Haushofer for his contribution to the Nazi Movement. For example, the same year the Nazis took power, Haushofer became President of the German Academy, serving in 1933 and 1937, head of the Volksdeutscher Rat, an organization charged with helping scientific associations in Germany and abroad (Heske 1987). He also was awarded a permanent full Professorship of Geography at the University of Munich (Barnes and Abrahamsson 2015, 68).

Through Hess's influence, Haushofer's conception of Geopolitik was a critical reason Hitler pursued his expansionist war (Epstein 2017). Haushofer was largely responsible for the political use of the term, and the program, of Lebensraum, which Hitler adopted in *Mein Kampf*. In turn, *Mein Kampf* was the motivation of Hitler's global Nazi expansionism and genocide program. Haushofer viewed history as a "Life-and-death struggle of nations for living space"

(Low 1996, 28). Furthermore, "much of what was found in *Mein Kampf* was simply a reflection of the nineteenth-century social Darwinism that Hitler and Haushofer shared" (Epstein 2017). A good summary of Hitler's beliefs and the Nazi worldview is here:

Evolution had produced races with different intellectual characteristics and potential, among which the "Aryan" or "Nordic" race was the most advanced on the evolutionary scale. This Aryan race was the only race capable of advanced cultural and technological achievements, and all the great civilizations in history were its creations...racial purity was essential to the survival of the Aryan race and therefore of higher civilization itself...Forces in the modern world were at work trying to poison and undermine the Nordic race; a struggle for survival was underway. The primary threat came from the allegedly inferior, though supposedly parasitic and crafty, Jewish race: but other forces such as the Slavs and Marxism also presented a danger. (Bendersky 2021, 20)

Haushofer had much to say about inferior, primitive races, such as the Aborigines, mentioning the topic 17 times in his Geopolitics book (Haushofer 2002, 55–59). Of note is he never broached the topic of the Jews as an inferior race in this, his main, Geopolitics work. He did include a very favorable mention of Soviet Jews in his discussion of Japanese-Soviet relationships (Haushofer 2002, 161–162).

Haushofer's Wife Martha's Sephardic Jewish Origins

Hitler's coming to power created problems for Haushofer because of his wife Martha's Sephardic Jewish origins. Due to pressure from Hess, Hitler reportedly declared Haushofer's family Aryan (Low 1996, 25). Nonetheless, Haushofer still worried about Martha and their two sons, Albrecht and Heinz. Despite pressure, Haushofer refused to divorce his wife and repeatedly turned to Hess to secure protection for his family from the regime's anti-Semitic legislation.

His wife's Jewish origins was part of the reason why Haushofer's geo-politics was not driven by anti-Semitism. This was in spite of the fact that anti-Semitism was a key ingredient of Hitler's worldview from his earliest political speeches in 1919–1920. "The world for Haushofer came down to the simple Darwinian script: 'struggle for survival.' The 'need for space' was paramount; 'the racial strength' of a nation decided its future" (Herwig 2016, 143).

Japan Becomes Involved as an Axis Power

In 1908, Haushofer spent two years as a military attaché in Japan. He was so impressed with Japan's economic, military, and political accomplishments

that he learned the Japanese language. Specifically, Japan taught him applied social Darwinism. War was a necessary imperative, one that drove evolution and rejuvenated otherwise decaying and decadent societies....In common biological knowledge, the strong survived; the weak fell by the wayside...survival depended upon only one question: How did any particular "race" fare in the constant "struggle for survival? (Herwig 2016, 33)

Haushofer wrote over a dozen reports about what he learned from the Japanese. He was confident that Germany could benefit greatly by adapting their policies and practices (Barnes and Abrahamsson 2015). Haushofer greatly admired the Japanese for several reasons, including the fact that they had proven themselves in war, defeating both China and Russia, and in annexing Korea, thereby securing their Lebensraum (Haushofer 2002, 144–164).

When back in Germany, Haushofer used his military reports to write his University of Munich doctoral dissertation. His dissertation documented, and celebrated, Japan's successes. The dissertation title was *Dai Nihon, Betrachtungen über Groß-Japans Wehrkraft, Weltstellung und Zukunft* [Reflections on Greater Japan's Military Strength and World Position]. In it Haushofer defended the Japanese people against the Nazi belief in the inferiority of the "yellow" race. Haushofer's aggressive campaign was part of the reason for the Axis coalition of Germany, Italy, and Japan.

Haushofer's Family

Haushofer's father, Max Haushofer, was professor of economics at the Royal Polytechnical University in Munich (Haushofer 2002, v) and the author of *Der Ewige Jude (The Eternal Jew)*, a vicious, inflammatory work ridiculing Jews throughout history to justify the Nazi goal of making Germany Judenfrei (Jew Free). It was republished in 1937 by Franz Eher Nachfolger, the publishing house of the German Nazi Party. Included in this version were 267 photographs denigrating the Jewish people (Maxwell 2008, 178). The specific influence of his father on Karl is unknown.

Haushofer's son, Albrecht, after completing his Ph.D. thesis titled *Pass-Staaten in den Alpen* [Mountain Pass Countries in the Alps], worked for the Foreign Office in Berlin. There he learned about the atrocities committed against Jews. Disgusted, he then joined the opposition. As his mother, whom he adored, was Jewish, this move was not surprising. Ironically, Albrecht father's books indirectly contributed to the extermination of his wife's people in Germany. Albrecht was eventually implicated in the July 1944 assassination attempt against Hitler. Both father and son were arrested in the summer

of 1944. Karl was released in late August. Albrecht was executed in the last days of April 1945. When the war ended, Karl Haushofer was arrested and interrogated by the Americans. For good reasons, he attempted to negate his enormous influence on Hitler and the Nazi Party:

Haushofer was very cautious, playing down any influence, suggesting that Hitler and even Hess lacked the intellectual wherewithal to understand his ideas....With an indictment for war crimes hanging in the balance, this is perhaps what one would have expected Haushofer to say....Haushofer was caught lying, and whitewashing past prejudicial statements. When Walsh confronted him with evidence of backtracking and prevarication, Haushofer claimed 'the poor memory belonging to an old man.' (Barnes and Abrahamsson 2015, 67)

Like many German academics, Haushofer had made very significant contributions to the Nazi Movement. Unlike Wernher von Braun, Karl Haushofer played a key role in the founding of Nazism by contributing

to Hitler's 'university education', potentially enabling the future Führer to attain 'full clarity'. Haushofer therefore was not simply an engineer or bureaucrat, following instructions, but possibly someone who had a hand in shaping the instructions themselves. In his 1940 Preface to a new edition of Ratzel's book, Haushofer 'proudly recounted how he had left a "well-read" copy of Ratzel's *Political Geography* behind him after a visit in 1924 to Landsberg prison, where from his cell Hitler was busy dictating the first draft of *Mein Kampf* to his assistant, Hess. (Barnes and Abrahamsson 2015, 68)

The fact is, Haushofer's influence on *Mein Kampf* was major: "Haushofer provided *Mein Kampf* with 'a line of argument, a thesis, and a series of geographical facts weighted with geographical significance'" (Barnes and Abrahamsson 2015, 68). Guilt over his critical contribution to the war, and unable to accept his son Albrecht's death, Karl Haushofer and his wife of nearly 50 years, Martha, committed joint suicide by poison in March 1946 (Haushofer 2002, xii). Haushofer requested to be buried in an unmarked grave because, in view of his realization of the horror that his ideas had caused Germany, and much of the rest of the world, he did not want to be remembered. Hitler and his wife, Eva, also committed suicide shortly after it was clear that Germany had decisively lost the war.

Summary

Hitler and the Nazi Party's core philosophy were a result of the core teachings of Munich Professor Karl Ernst Haushofer and Haushofer's disciple, Rudolf Hess. Lanz von Liebenfels and Houston Stewart

Chamberlin also influenced Hitler, and both were promoters of the theory of the Aryan master race idea (Goldhagen 1996). Furthermore, both argued that evolution had produced races that had different intellectual abilities, and the Aryan race was the most evolved. And “in Hitler’s mind, the progress of humanity depended solely upon the Aryans” (Bendersky 2021, 20–21).

Haushofer also played a critical role in forming the central ideas in Hitler’s manifesto, *Mein Kampf*. *Mein Kampf*, in turn, was the blueprint that Hitler used to direct his regime and, as a result, the Nazi Party followed it very closely. In the end, the ideas in *Mein Kampf* produced the Holocaust and World War II. Charles Darwin’s ideas had a critical influence on both Haushofer and Hess as well as Hitler. Hitler was also influenced by Darwin’s main German disciple, Ernst Haeckel. Haushofer’s influence was important in bringing Japan into WWII. As Weikart concluded:

The Darwinian struggle for existence—especially the struggle between the races—played a central role in Hitler’s worldview. In the Darwinian struggle for existence, organisms, especially those of the same species, compete for scarce resources to sustain an expanding population....Hitler believed that the struggle for existence among humans necessarily involved military conflict. (Weikart 2009, 160)

Thus, WWII and the Nazi Movement appeared justified to Hitler and his Nazi government no matter what the cost. The estimated total deaths caused by World War II is close to 18,000,000 in the U.S.S.R., plus an estimated 5,800,000 Poles (20% of Poland’s pre-war population). Furthermore, 298,000 Americans died, plus about 4,200,000 Germans and 1,972,000 Japanese (Encyclopedia Britannica). In addition, Nazi Germany exterminated around 6,000,000 Jewish people, as well as hundreds of thousands of Romani “Gypsies” (Holocaust Museum 2023).

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