

# FDR and Hitler: A Study in Contrasts

by David M. Kennedy

*Adolf Hitler, n.d. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division) and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 1935 (Gilder Lehrman Collection)*

**T**he Great Depression and World War II were events in world history, but they touched different countries in sometimes dramatically different ways. To paraphrase Tolstoy, many peoples suffered, but every unhappy people was unhappy in its own way—and understanding the particularities of the individual cases can do much to illuminate questions of national character and the role of contingency in history.



The Depression was a monstrous, planetary-scale economic hurricane that wreaked havoc around the globe. All nations were walloped by its destructive force, but two were especially hard-hit: the United States and Germany. In both countries production sank by nearly half, while unemployment approached 25 percent—levels of economic collapse and human misery unmatched elsewhere.

In the United States and Germany alike the Depression badly discredited existing political regimes and created opportunities for new leaders to emerge. In a striking contrast that speaks volumes about the different political cultures that spawned them, Germany got Adolf Hitler, and the United States got Franklin D. Roosevelt. At the outset, both asked to be judged on their records of success or failure in doing battle against the Depression. Both were ultimately judged on other grounds altogether—the one universally condemned in the history books, the other almost universally praised.

The two men never met—though their lives uncannily paralleled one another’s and at last fatefully intersected in the gargantuan conflict of World War II. Roosevelt, born in 1882, and Hitler, born in 1889, were men of the same generation. Eerily, as if conforming to the plot of a Gothic novel, they died with days of one another—Roosevelt on April 12, 1945, Hitler just eighteen days later. Each in his respective country came to supreme power within the span of a few weeks. Hitler was installed as Germany’s chancellor on January 30, 1933; Roosevelt was inaugurated as president of the United States just thirty-five days later, on March 4. Both headed advanced industrial states deeply afflicted by the Depression. Both had achieved office by means of democratic elections, though democracy soon withered under one’s hand and flourished under that of the other.

Roosevelt’s entire presidency unfolded under the shadow of Hitler’s tyrannical fanaticism. Of the events that compose the great chapters of Roosevelt’s political biography—the drama of the “Hundred Days,” the battle against the Depression, the landmark social and economic reforms of the New Deal, and later the agony of uncertainty about Europe’s fate and America’s relation to it, the struggle against isolationism, and the waging of World War II—all played out against the looming threat and eventually the armed challenge of Hitler’s Nazi regime. Roosevelt’s trials and

achievements, as well as the very character of American democracy in the mid-twentieth century, can only be properly understood in that larger context.

But if the parallels in these two lives are instructive, so are the contrasts, and even more tellingly. In the spring of 1933, Roosevelt was coaxing the Hundred Days' legislation out of the American Congress, wooing the labor unions and the ethnic and racial minorities with which he would build a long-lasting Democratic Party electoral majority, and making highly innovative use of the radio to reach beyond the hostile media magnates who controlled the nation's newspapers. In those same months, Hitler was turning the Reichstag (the German legislature) into his personal instrument, dissolving the German labor unions, and ruthlessly purging all criticism of his policies from the German press. Soon he declared the Nazis the only legal party in Germany, and proceeded to impose a reign of terror on the German people, cruelly enforced by the Geheime Staatspolizei, or "Gestapo," the Nazis' brutally efficient secret police, the likes of which has no parallel in the entire history of the United States.

A year later, while Roosevelt was worrying about a possible political challenge from within his own party by the swashbuckling Louisiana Senator Huey P. Long, Hitler dispatched with his main Nazi rival, Sturmabteilung leader Ernst Röhm, by having him summarily executed.

The following year, 1935, Roosevelt shepherded his sweeping reform program through Congress, notably including the Social Security Act and the Wagner National Labor Relations Act, initiatives that made life far safer for millions of Americans and helped to usher them into the mainstream of American life, including especially members of the great immigrant communities that had arrived a generation or so earlier. "We are going to make a country," Roosevelt said, "in which no one is left out." In that same year, Hitler codified the Nazis' viciously anti-Semitic policies in the notorious Nuremberg Decrees, which stripped German Jews of their citizenship, barred them from the professions and military service, and prohibited marriage between Jews and "Aryans"—all gruesome steps on the road to the genocidal wartime Holocaust that would eventually decimate European Jewry.

Hitler and Roosevelt were men of the same era, of the same generation, leaders of comparably developed countries with a largely shared heritage of beliefs and values, facing the same economic crisis—but yielding two entirely different political results, and two entirely different legacies for their peoples.

In the great conflict of World War II, Hitler's Germany and Roosevelt's America also fought very different wars—and not just because Germany went down to defeat and America emerged triumphant. Indeed, America's experience in World War II stands in vivid contrast with the experience of all other combatants, including not only Germany but America's allies in the "Grand Alliance" as well.

Hitler's vaunted "1,000-year Reich" lay in smoldering ruins at war's end, his people dazed, demoralized, and starving. The strutting Führer had brewed a catastrophe so vast that its conclusion seemed to sunder the web of time itself. Germans remember the moment of their surrender on May 8, 1945, as Stunde null, or "zero hour," when history's clock came to a fearful halt. For generations thereafter they have lived with a burden of guilt for their country's role in precipitating and waging the war. America, meanwhile, in the words of Winston Churchill, stood at that same moment "at the summit of the world," and Americans have ever after recollected World War II as "the good war," fought and won by the "greatest generation."

Elsewhere, even Roosevelt's wartime partners—Britain and the Soviet Union—had paid a far greater price in blood and treasure than their fortunate American ally.

Uniquely among all the belligerent countries in World War II—perhaps uniquely in the history of warfare—the United States alone had managed to grow its civilian economy even while waging a hugely costly war. In Britain and the Soviet Union, as well as Germany, the civilian standard of living went down by approximately one-third, exacting a huge price in terms of mundane, daily deprivation from peoples already afflicted by wholesale destruction and death. In the United States, on the other hand, the civilian economy actually expanded by 15 percent, preparing the way for phenomenal prosperity in the postwar decades.

And though it is true that 405,399 brave American servicemen died in World War II, proportionate to population, American losses were about one-third of Britain's, and about one-sixtieth of those in the Soviet Union—where some eight million soldiers and a staggering sixteen million civilians lost their lives. And as for those civilian casualties: in the forty-eight continental American states, the ones that had a star on the flag in 1945, the US civilian death toll due to enemy action was just six persons, a twenty-five-year-old minister's wife and five children from her church, all of them the victims of a crude Japanese balloon-borne fire-bomb that exploded in their faces on May 5, 1945, on the slopes of Gearhart Mountain, near the hamlet of Bly, Oregon.

Our national mythology has enshrined the Depression as a time of unparalleled suffering, and World War II as a monument to patriotic sacrifice and unselfish service to the cause of freedom. Without denying those stories, a comparison with other people's experience can serve as a reminder that for all the misery that Depression and war visited upon the United States, Americans could count their blessings that fortune—and wise leadership—had spared them the enormously more ghastly deprivations and horrors that were all too common elsewhere.

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**David Kennedy** is Donald J. McLachlan Professor of History, Emeritus at Stanford University. *In Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (1980) he used the history of American involvement in World War I to analyze the American political system, economy, and culture in the early twentieth century. *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War* (1999), for which he won the Pulitzer Prize, recounts the history of the United States in the two great crises of the Great Depression and World War II.