

History of the Third Reich. Hitler and the Atomic Bomb

75 Years on: Hitler and Antonescu Discuss the Atomic Bomb at the Wolf's Lair

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Author's preface

German dictator Adolf Hitler had a central role in initiating World War II, by pursuing a list of bold and aggressive foreign policy actions dating from the mid-1930s, and culminating in his invasion of Poland in the autumn of 1939 - an attack which had prior agreement with Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, who absorbed the eastern half of the Polish state.

Hitler's expansionist acts on the European mainland inevitably spread forth to a global scale and, most tragically, he would ruthlessly pursue an organized and therefore unprecedented genocide mainly perpetrated against the continent's Jewish populations, and also targeting groups such as Romani people and those with physical disabilities.

Hitler's brutal treatment of the people of Poland, and from the summer of 1941 against the Soviet Union's populace, resulted in further astonishing bloodshed. By early 1945, the Nazis had claimed the lives of at least 25 million of the USSR's population, much of those who lost their lives comprising of civilians.

The above criminal actions have been broadly documented by historians for a number of decades. However, receiving very little attention indeed from scholars is that pertaining to Hitler's viewpoints on the critically important area of nuclear research, and regarding the atomic bomb then undergoing production in the United States. This subject is entirely relevant to the present day, with the threat of a devastating nuclear war hovering over humanity's head, as it has been for at least two generations.

Seventy-five years ago, on 5 August 1944, **Adolf Hitler** stirred from his Wolf's Lair headquarters deep in the Masurian woods of East Prussia, so as to welcome **Ion Antonescu**, the autocrat of Romania.

During Hitler's more than 800 days ensconced at the Wolf's Lair near the medieval town of Rastenburg, he hosted an array of foreign dignitaries there, from Vichy puppet leader **Pierre Laval**, to Croatian dictator **Ante Pavelic** and of course **Il Duce** himself, Italy's **Benito Mussolini**. Kings and statesmen also arrived to see Hitler at the Wolf's Lair, such as **Tsar Boris III** of Bulgaria and the Finnish commander **Carl Gustaf Mannerheim**.

Antonescu, aged in his early 60s and a former career army officer, was a wiry and nimble man but one of diminutive stature. As the two dictators greeted each other warmly, Hitler

standing at almost 5 feet 8 inches was appreciably taller than Antonescu, the latter being not much more than 5 feet in height.

By late summer 1944, the course of the war had taken a physical toll on both men. Hitler's firm stride and domineering posture, regularly on public display in the early 1940s, had largely withered to be replaced by a stoop of the shoulders, an aging figure with an almost melancholic expression on his face. Hitler was also shaken by the attempt on his life that occurred just over two weeks before, though he miraculously escaped the bombing with slight injuries.



Antonescu had meanwhile greyed further around the temples, his shoulders slagged like Hitler's, while his face betrayed a somewhat resigned look, as though he was simply waiting for the end. This was their 10th meeting since late 1940, when Antonescu had assumed power in the Romanian capital Bucharest. From the time the two first became acquainted (on 22 November 1940) Hitler was highly impressed by Antonescu's demeanour and pragmatism. The Nazi leader later [said of him](#),

"If something happened to Antonescu, I'd tremble for Romania. Who'd succeed him? King Michael".

Antonescu was a major figure in the war, and an important ally of Hitler's, though with passing decades his name has mostly been forgotten. Their relationship was no doubt strengthened by Antonescu having granted the Wehrmacht full access to the Ploiesti oil fields in southern Romania - which was a vital lubricant that assisted the German war machine in continuing to roll long into the conflict. Antonescu was in addition responsible for serious crimes; his attachment to Hitler inevitably resulted in direct complicity with the Holocaust.

As 1944 was advancing, both men were aware their regimes were in precarious positions. Throughout the summer of 1944, Soviet armies made huge gains into Nazi-occupied Europe, and they were now approaching the frontiers of Antonescu's Romania. American and British divisions had pushed their way (though slowly) in a south-easterly direction through France, after landing at Normandy on 6 June 1944. Allied advances were elsewhere being conducted northwards through Italy, but once more their progress was remarkably slow with the greatly outnumbered Germans providing continued fierce resistance.

At the Wolf's Lair, Hitler and Antonescu talked for many hours through the day, while present among them were **Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel** and **Foreign Minister Joachim Ribbentrop**. No concrete agreement was reached on lasting relations between Germany and Romania. This outcome to the discussions has been documented by historians. Little mentioned to present times, however, is that Hitler and Antonescu also spoke about the atomic bomb's development, which they knew was undergoing production in America.

What's more, the Axis leaders issued dire warnings regarding the planet's future were humankind to unleash nuclear weapons. In the first hours of August 1944 a German news agency, Transocean Innendienst, zoned in on a report that featured in the Swedish newspaper, Stockholms Tidningen, which portrayed how,

“In the United States, scientific experiments are being carried out on a new bomb. Its explosive substance is uranium, and when the elements within its structure are liberated, a force of hitherto undreamt-of violence is generated. A 5 kilo bomb could create a crater one kilometre deep and of 40 kilometres radius”.

This account was relayed in the German press. Hitler was informed of it prior to his conference with Antonescu on 5 August 1944, 366 days before the bombing of Hiroshima. Changing tack from the strenuous military situation, Hitler discussed with Antonescu the growing likelihood of an atomic bomb being created.

One of Hitler’s primary concerns regarding the weapon was that, on detonation, it could “bring about the final catastrophe” by igniting with the planet’s atmosphere, destroying everything: Humans walking the earth, birds and bees in the sky, fishes in the ocean.

Hitler’s fears on this subject were confirmed to him in mid-1942 by one of the Nazis’ leading scientists and Nobel Prize winner, **Werner Heisenberg**; who provided no definitive answer as to whether a successful nuclear fission could be kept in check, or if it would be of an uncontrollable nature, spreading forth and bringing about the doomsday scenario. In June 1942 Hitler said in half-jest to his armaments minister **Albert Speer**, recently succeeding the late **Fritz Todt**, that the scientists “might one day set the globe on fire” by their discoveries.

Hitler expounded on his hope that the physicists and weapons manufacturers – who were working on this atomic weapon – would refrain from deploying it, until they were certain it could not spark a chain reaction with the hydrogen in the air.

Unfortunately, the specialists in question were not as rational as Hitler had expected. They would in fact knowingly gamble with all life on earth. The following July, 1945 – in the hours preceding the first testing of an atomic bomb in New Mexico – America’s chief nuclear technician, **Enrico Fermi**, estimated there was actually a much greater chance of the planet being turned into dust than Western scientists supposed. Fermi calculated there was a 10% possibility that the world [would be destroyed](#) through an unstoppable chain reaction; exactly in the manner that Hitler had previously elaborated upon.

Fermi, who was born in Rome, had become a nervous wreck in the build-up to the atomic explosion in New Mexico’s desert, which took place early on 16 July 1945. Fermi even began taking bets on the danger of our world ending following the blast. Many other scientists working on the US nuclear program were also feeling extremely tense. Like Heisenberg, they were unable to rule out the hazard of the globe being sizzled akin to a tomato in a frying pan.

The possibility of worldwide apocalyptic scenes was also known by US military personnel such as **General Leslie Groves**, directing America’s nuclear program. The astonishing risks were brushed aside; nothing was done to halt the atomic test. It was deemed more important to acquire nuclear weapons with Soviet Russia in mind.

Meanwhile, at the Wolf’s Lair, spurred on by Hitler’s misgivings regarding nuclear research, Antonescu replied to his German host that he “personally hoped not to be alive” if uranium was infused to a bomb as it “might perhaps bring about the end of the world”. Hitler then [recalled reading](#) an unnamed German writer “who had predicted just that”.



Antonescu's wish was not granted, as he would live to see the nuclear age with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Antonescu was overthrown in a "Royal Coup" on 23 August 1944, less than three weeks after he saw Hitler for the last time. Over ensuing days, Antonescu was handed over to Soviet occupation forces and dispatched towards Moscow for interrogation, before being returned to Romania where he was executed near Bucharest in early June 1946.

Hitler, meanwhile, had been aware of the potential of atomic weapons for years. Following Speer's release from prison in October 1966 he revealed, long after he had grown to hate Hitler, that in June 1942 the Führer was far from pleased "that the earth could be transformed into a glowing star" by the pursual of uranium weapons.

While Speer's passages relating to Hitler and nuclear research have been sporadically noted, virtually unheard of is the testimony of **Otto Skorzeny**, whom the Allies dubbed "the most dangerous man in Europe". Skorzeny was a high-ranking SS commando who became close to Hitler from the autumn of 1943 onwards, after he led the operation to secure Mussolini from a mountain top prison in central Italy. Skorzeny claims that, by the late 1930s, Hitler was aware of the vast possibilities of nuclear fission.

A generation after the war Skorzeny [wrote that](#),

"From 1939, Hitler was interested in the unbelievable potential of nuclear fission. In autumn 1940, he had a long discussion on the subject with Dr. Todt, the armaments minister".

Following his talks with Todt in 1940, Hitler's "opinion never changed: he thought that the use of atomic energy for military purposes would mean the end of humanity".

Skorzeny asserts that from the early 1940s Hitler read various statements on nuclear research, including a 1942 paper produced by his physicist Heisenberg pertaining to nuclear fission.

Because of Skorzeny's membership of the criminal SS, allied to the fact he was an unapologetic Nazi who admired Hitler, scholars and readers are likely to be skeptical

regarding his revelations on Hitler and the bomb. Yet upon close inspection, Skorzeny's analysis is conducted at length, in detail and it does appear plausible.

Furthermore, as seen, his comments are bolstered by Speer, a member of Hitler's inner circle for over a decade; and further support comes from British authors like **Geoffrey Michael Brooks** who [highlighted that Hitler](#) "saw no advantage in destroying the world" through the pursuit of nuclear weapons.

After Speer had seemingly washed his hands of Hitler, he was still describing the latter as "this visionary". It included terrible visions that became reality such as the Holocaust, but Speer affirms that Hitler formulated large-scale plans and foresaw events that many others could not.

Speer [notes that the](#)

Nazi leader "really came from another world. That was why, whenever he appeared on the scene in the course of the war, he always seemed so bizarre. But I always thought that the alien quality also constituted part of his strength".

Speer continues that Germany's "military men had all learned to deal with a wide variety of unusual situations, but they were totally unprepared to deal with this visionary [Hitler]".

In a great irony, the democratically elected Western leaders expressed little concern regarding the construction of atomic weapons. Quite often to the contrary. **Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman** and **Winston Churchill** were all advocates of the atomic bomb, especially the latter two statesmen.

After a B-29 aircraft unloaded an A-bomb on Hiroshima during 6 August 1945, president Truman called the weapon "the greatest thing in history" and, somewhat surreally,

"We thank God it has come to us, instead of to our enemies, and we pray that He may guide us to use it in His ways and His purposes".

Churchill outlined there was "unanimous" agreement to drop atomic weapons on Japan [and that](#) "there was never a moment's discussion" otherwise. There were no qualms expressed for our planet's security, no warnings for the future of mankind. Over the unfolding seven decades, humanity has had one close escape after another with nuclear weapons.

In the meantime, Skorzeny proceeds to write about a personal meeting he claims to have had with Hitler at the Wolf's Lair, in October 1944. By this time, the Red Army was within comfortable driving distance of the two and a half square mile complex, and were gradually closing in. Hitler nonetheless stayed put for now.

Skorzeny had visited the Wolf's Lair a number of times in the past. It was always a lonely, intimidating journey, even by motor car. In fictional terms, it evoked similarities of the long carriage ride finally leading up to Count Dracula's castle in Transylvania. On occasion, Hitler had been photographed wearing a long black cape as he stalked the Wolf's Lair grounds.

Skorzeny navigated his way through the apparently endless winding roads, that snaked

through thick forests reaching the heavily camouflaged Wolf's Lair, which would never experience enemy bombing raids.

He arrived at the compound only to be told that Hitler was ill, and had retired to his bedroom. Yet Hitler issued strict orders that Skorzeny be sent to him at once.

"I am certainly one of the few visitors, if not the only one, whom the Führer received in bed", Skorzeny wrote.

He was summoned to discuss the upcoming Ardennes Offensive, and his central role in it.

Skorzeny promptly marched off to the master's private quarters. After knocking on the door and entering Hitler's room, the bed-ridden dictator motioned him towards a chair, in order to be briefed on assignments with regard to Operation Greif: A new special mission which included capturing intact one or more bridges over the River Meuse in Belgium.

Following a few minutes of military evaluation their conversation is said to have turned towards "secret weapons"; which would somehow perform a role in reversing Nazi Germany's fortunes.

Skorzeny then writes that,

"Spontaneously I began speaking of the rumours about artificial radioactivity and its eventual use as a weapon".

Reacting, Hitler "looked at me with gleaming, feverish eyes" and he professes the Nazi leader said,

"if the energy and radioactivity released through nuclear fission were used as a weapon, that would mean the end of our planet... From strike to counterstrike humanity would inevitably exterminate itself".

Skorzeny purports that Hitler spoke too of the possibility [that everything](#) "would be totally extinguished for hundreds of years within a radius of 40 kilometres. That would be the apocalypse". The 40 kilometre statistic, that he attributes to Hitler, matches the radius of destruction revealed in the Swedish press two months before, circulated in a German news agency and which Hitler was aware of.

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