

# Undergraduate Research Journal

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Volume 24

Article 4

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8-1-2020

## Powerful Men: An Evaluation of Successful Rhetoric

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### Recommended Citation

Hollenbeck, Rachel (2020) "Powerful Men: An Evaluation of Successful Rhetoric," *Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 24 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://openspaces.unk.edu/undergraduate-research-journal/vol24/iss1/4>

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## Powerful Men: An Evaluation of Successful Rhetoric

### Cover Page Footnote

Mentor: Dr. Amanda Sladek, Department of English

# POWERFUL MEN: AN EVALUATION OF SUCCESSFUL RHETORIC

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the rhetoric of Adolf Hitler and Winston Churchill and why it was so successful. Both men are famous for their rhetoric, but this study is a more in-depth look at how they spoke well and influenced people. Through the lens of Lloyd F. Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation" and the classical rhetorical appeals, multiple details of Hitler and Churchill's speeches are brought to attention and analyzed, especially how their responses fit the situations they were facing, how they connected with their audiences, and how their wording matched the goals they were trying to achieve. One of the purposes of this paper is to note the strengths of Hitler and Churchill's rhetoric to assist in the analysis of the influential rhetoric of today so that the audience may be made aware of the power of rhetoric.*

Adolf Hitler and Winston Churchill were both instrumental in the events of World War II. Not only did they have power to sway and direct their militaries, but they were both especially known for their rhetoric: their speeches and abilities of persuasion. Through their rhetoric they convinced soldiers to keep engaging the enemy, by-standers to join the fight, the people at home to sacrifice and contribute to the war effort, and the general populace to have hope and belief that victory was achievable even in the darkest days of the war. Hitler and Churchill did not just think of some good things to say during their speeches or hire qualified speech writers to create messages that would induce people to listen to them. Both men personally wrote their own speeches and excelled at presenting them. They looked at their audiences and tailored the words to the needs and context of the situation. While on opposite sides of a major world conflict, Hitler and Churchill determinedly set about convincing their people that it was worth the effort to fight and keep fighting. They accomplished these things with influential rhetoric that set the stage for national determination that ultimately led to their success or utter destruction at the end of the war. Through their skillful rhetoric, Adolf Hitler and Winston Churchill guided those around them and became powerful men.

Lloyd F. Bitzer, Professor of Rhetoric at the University of Wisconsin, wrote an article entitled "The Rhetorical Situation" in which he points out that rhetorical discourse requires a rhetorical situation. A rhetorical situation is an invitation to respond, and a fitting response requires an accurate reading of said situation (Bitzer 5-6). The timing is also important because a response too early or too late misses the mark (Bitzer 6). Hitler and Churchill, with some of the same aims—to win the Second World War—and some differing aims—such as wiping out entire people groups or protecting an island nation from being taken over—both understood what was required in their rhetoric. Bitzer expounds on the idea that rhetoric is strongly connected to situations with these words: "a work of rhetoric is pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task...rhetoric is a mode of altering reality..." (3). The altering of reality was a major goal in Hitler and Churchill's speeches and the effectiveness of their rhetoric can be seen by what happened in history. When analyzing speeches, it is also useful to observe the rhetorical appeals of logos (appealing to logic), ethos (appealing to credibility), and pathos (appealing to emotion). These

appeals can be made through tone, movement, volume, word choice, word repetition, rhythm, and stories. Throughout this analysis, it will also be noted how Hitler and Churchill used rhetorical appeals in their creation of fitting responses.

Many crises occurred before, during, and after the Second World War that begged for rhetorical replies. In the 1920s and 1930s, the German people dealt with war debts, displaced people, unemployment, and a depression. Hitler stepped forward with eagerness to act and eagerness to blame, both of which answered if not the needs then the desires of the people. In a speech given to the SA, Nazi Storm Troopers, in Munich on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1921, just after World War I but before the publication of his book *Mein Kampf* and the Nazi Party's rise to power, he declared:

For us there are only two possibilities: either we remain German or we come under the thumb of the Jews. This latter must not occur; even if we are small, we are a force. A well-organized group can conquer a strong enemy. If you stick close together and keep bringing in new people, we will be victorious over the Jews.

These words addressed the desire to have control and power, and to rise and fight against a common enemy. To win after the great defeat of World War I. The first line of the quote above proposes without much question that there are only two options for the people of Germany. The image of coming "under the thumb of the Jews," although there are other people groups that could have been inserted here, led Hitler's audience to revulsion and disgust of the prospect facing them if they didn't address what Herr Hitler was presenting them.

Thirteen years later in 1934, Hitler continued to address the desire for control when he gave his closing speech to the Nazi Sixth Party Congress in Nuremberg. The speech was recorded and made into a film entitled "Triumph of the Will":

Because these men, the best of the German race, in proud self-confidence, have courageously and boldly claimed the leadership of the Reich and Nation, the people in ever greater numbers have joined this leadership and subordinated themselves. ...In the past, our enemies persecuted us and have removed the undesirable elements from our Party for us. Today, we ourselves must remove undesirable elements which have proven to be bad. What is bad, has no place among us!

Hitler used specific wording to persuade his listeners of the "goodness" of the Nazi party: best, courageously, boldly, leadership, persecuted. He also used other wording to cast dispersion on his enemies: undesirable, bad. The way he stated the actions of the Nazi party built them up to be followed. His vision casting also held strong emotional pull as he looked to the future while also evoking an honored past:

It is our wish and will that this State and Reich will endure for millennia to come. We are happy in the knowledge that this fortune belongs to us completely! ...eventually, the magnificent, glorious army, those old proud warriors of our Nation, will be joined by the political leadership of the Party equally tradition-

minded, and then these two institutions together will educate and strengthen the German Man and carry on their shoulders the German State, the German Reich!

The vision of victory after the humiliating defeat of the last war and the hope of a millennia of empire was a part of the strength of Hitler's rhetoric. He answered the call of the humiliated and economically challenged German people.

Churchill also answered the call of his people. The 1940 speech "We Shall Fight on the Beaches" is an example of Churchill's response and strength in meeting rhetorical situations. The context of the speech was Dunkirk: the retreat of British troops from continental Europe back to Great Britain. The evacuation of Dunkirk had rescued an astounding number of British troops and thousands of French troops from the conquering Nazi army. Churchill saw the rejoicing of the British people over having their boys back in country but realized the importance of preparing people to fight the war that was at hand. He knew he needed to stir up patriotism. In "We Shall Fight on the Beaches," Churchill described the battle of France, the good and the bad that occurred, and the carefulness and craftiness of the enemy. He made special note of the courageous and dedicated acts of the Allied troops and painted the sacrifice of the British troops as heroic. Narrative after narrative was described in his speech, each using emotionally charged words that rallied his listeners together. When he described how the Royal Air Force participated in saving the retreating troops he declared:

This struggle was protracted and fierce. Suddenly the scene has cleared, the crash and thunder has for the moment-but only for the moment-died away. A miracle of deliverance, achieved by valor, by perseverance, by perfect discipline, by faultless service, by resource, by skill, by unconquerable fidelity, is manifest to us all.

His word choices were purposeful. The description showed the reality of the events that had just transpired and the actions of the British troops. Not only did the words apply to what had just happened but the list of attributes pointed forward to what would be needed to win the war.

Churchill's goal in this speech was not just to act as a news reporter on how the war was going. After sharing what had happened at Dunkirk, he articulated the purpose of this address:

We must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory. Wars are not won by evacuations. But there was a victory inside this deliverance, which should be noted. (Churchill, "We Shall Fight on the Beaches")

Churchill's desire was to motivate his people to be ready for more war: "we shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our Island [*sic*] home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny, if necessary for years, if necessary alone" (Churchill, "We Shall Fight on the Beaches"). The word *tyranny* is an important term because it evoked the passion of the British people for liberty, something that they had held proud devotion to for centuries. Some of his most famous lines finish out the speech as he sought to inspire the people of Britain by declaring over and over that they would not give up in their fight against tyranny and for liberty:

We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender... (Churchill, "We Shall Fight on the Beaches")

Churchill met the needs of his people by holding out hope and determination, reminding them of their need for victory over an enemy that was creeping closer and taking over their allies. The rhetoric that Churchill used throughout his speeches shows the power with which he responded to the rhetorical situations he was facing.

When Hitler presented his speeches, he proved he knew the people of Germany. His delivery was soulful and his tone was dramatic. He looked up and down and into space as he spoke, moving his head in sharp movements. His arms and hands moved in sweeping motions, gesturing to himself when he mentioned "we," forming fists and moving towards his chest and away in gestures that are now recognizably his and are revived when he is portrayed in movies. His tone rose as he read his speech, getting more intense and staccato. The German and Nazi audiences responded to his performances. In the middle of his speeches, at the end of phrases, the crowd got worked up and started heiling so loud that he would pause before continuing. In the article "Hitler's Movement Signature," authors Martha Davis and Dianne Dulicai write of Hitler's speeches: "At first he does not gesticulate. But before long, he crescendos into the resonating shouts and histrionics so often seen in Hitler documentaries, his face expressing rage, his arm slicing the air. The harangue builds from forte to fortissimo to fortississimo, then abruptly it is over" (152). His style was very deliberate. He knew how he wanted to move his crowds and he performed his speeches in a way that would help him achieve those goals.

Churchill's actions and tone were vastly different from Hitler's and showed his knowledge and connection to his own audience. He often started his speeches with his hands clasped and would turn his body while he spoke to include his whole audience. Sometimes he would release his hands from in front of him and spread them to make a point then allow them to settle back at his sides. Common gestures during his speeches included touching his lapel, pointing in the air, and fisting one hand. It was not unusual for him to tuck his hands under his lapels and leave them there for a time. The beginning of his speeches was marked by physical stillness while later on he gestured more, although his movements were comparatively small and less sweeping, more in an English taste. During a speech, Churchill's tone would become more insistent and declarative but only sometimes did his volume grow louder. Churchill's speeches consisted of cadence and repetition. "We Shall Fight on the Beaches" is an excellent example of this as he sets the pace "We shall go on... We shall fight... We shall fight... We shall defend..." and then at the end breaks the cadence with "We shall never surrender..." As Lori Maguire wrote in her rhetorical analysis of the "We Shall Fight" speech, "Meter and rhythm are an important element in all his speeches" (261). It was one of his strategies of rhetoric.

Hitler was serious in his speeches. His goal was to connect the audiences to his story and to have them identify with the sorrowful injustices that were happening to the German people so that they would fight for his visions with passion. Churchill also had a solemn component to his

speeches but utilized humor to connect with his audience as well. In the opening of his “Masters of our Fate” speech, which he presented before the U.S. Congress on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December 1941, Churchill sounded very English and proper but his words and humor allowed his American audience to relate. The second line of his address illustrates how his humor was intentional:

The fact that my American forebears have for so many generations played their part in the life of the United States, and that here I am, an Englishman, welcomed in your midst, makes this experience one of the most moving and thrilling in my life, which is already long and has not been entirely uneventful.

The words themselves may not seem particularly funny, but his presentation made them so. He paused after “my life” and looked up from his paper, shaking his head slightly to emphasis “which is already long,” then he glanced back down then up again before saying “and has not been entirely uneventful.” Although the men around him and in his audience did not immediately respond, at first slowly smiling at the long life, they laughed heartily at his life not being entirely uneventful. He gave a slight pause after the words before continuing on. Two lines later he remarked with amusement in his voice, “By the way, I cannot help reflecting that if my father had been American and my mother British, instead of the other way around, I might have got here on my own.” He finished the delivery by looking up at his audience with a wry face and this time they laughed with even more gusto and clapped in appreciation, warming up to the idea of his humor. These words were meant to bring about camaraderie and foster goodwill as he ushered in the main portion of his speech. His willingness to cause his audience to laugh allowed him to then lead them into the rest of the address with ease and with greater trust as he retold the events that had taken place since the Great War, recounted current world affairs, and stated his belief in the British and American people to respond well to the issues at hand.

Hitler and Churchill were two very different men who are still remembered today for their rhetoric. They both played vital parts in the Second World War due to the profound effect of their words and the power they achieved from them. Hitler and Churchill read rhetorical situations well, chose their words and phrases with care, knew their audiences, and connected to their audiences through the presentation of their speeches and their use of narratives. While these men used their abilities for vastly different purposes, there is no question that these two men changed the history of their countries and the world through their rhetoric. Their speeches caused people to fight and support a war. Their speeches caused their people to continue fighting when all seemed hopeless. And their speeches caused people to believe in victory even in the darkest days of the war. Both men used powerful rhetoric to become powerful men.

Hitler and Churchill were masters at their craft. By studying their rhetoric today, we can learn what successful rhetoric looks like and how it can influence people, and us, to think and act in ways that the orator desires—for good and for evil. We can also become more aware of how appeals in communication can be used to convince us to trust a speaker’s credibility and to think and feel in accordance with the strategy of the speaker. While rhetoric is not a solely positive or negative thing, by recognizing the art of rhetoric and the ways in which people can be influenced by it, we are better able to see and evaluate the rhetoric in our own lives and not succumb to persuasive speakers without being aware of their purpose.

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