Kenneth Burke: “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” (1941)

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Kenneth Burke was born May 5, 1897, in Pittsburgh, PA, and died at age 96 on November 19, 1993, in Andover, NJ. He was self-educated after high school, among the writers/artists in Greenwich Village, and he “studied the relationships between language, literature, culture, and power in a variety of wide-ranging and complex works; for many years his theories were often dismissed as obscure and idiosyncratic, but they later gained a renewed appreciation.” (Britannic, 1994). Burke quite college because he was "horrified . . . what college can do to a man of promise." (Britannic, 1994). Burke had a farmhouse on seventy acres in northwestern New Jersey that he had originally bought in 1922, but he also kept an apartment in the city so that he had “a bridging device that would enable him to move in literary and intellectual circles in the city while cultivating a sanctuary in the countryside in keeping with sense of self as a ‘Neo-Stoic / Agro-Bohemian.’” (Harvard Review, p 84). Burke had an extremely profound way of looking at the world and critically analyzing what was going on in it at any given point and time.

Burke states that Hitler has the “cure for what ails you” a “snakeoil,” that will fix everything, a “higher standard of living,” (Burke, p207.) Hitler played on the beaten emotions and diminished religious belief system of a nation that was already impoverished and suffering from the defeats inflicted from the First World War. Burke explains how Hitler’s propaganda plans to use the Jews as the scapegoat for all of Germany’s poverty, weakened religious structures, impure bloodlines, and the capitalistic materialism in their country. Hitler accuses the Jews of keeping all of the wealth for themselves, in turn keeping the Germans impoverished. Burke keeps his ideas organized and consistent in his head I think, but he is hard to follow with some of his $22.00 words and his circles of scholarly banter. I find myself trying to keep up with his ideas and ideologies, and at the end of the page I’m still lost. Although Burke makes
extremely valid points in his review about how much of manacle, sinister maniac that Hitler really was. The way Burke writes is not always reader friendly, but if you can sort through the big words and try to remember that he is using Dramatistic criticism and focus on the basic concept of that, it becomes a little easier to muddle through his articles.

Burke considers that Hitler’s underlying plans for war and the total genocide of the Jewish nation ultimately was the most important thing to consider. Hitler uses mass gatherings of German people in order to spread his persuasive propaganda more effectively. He also uses the certain times of the evening hours to spread these lies, because it is easier to manipulate and pursued a weak and tired mind. Burke touches on a combination of economic status, social and political views, intellectualism, and religious beliefs throughout his critique. Burke states that Hitler uses a combination of all of these in order to influence and corrupt the minds of the German people. Burke states very clearly that Hitler’s intent is to start a war, exterminate Jewish people, and to start the Master race, but I guess we see how people listened to that in the 40’s. I believe that Burke was writing as an intervention for World War II. Burke used Freudian psychology, Dramatistic criticism, and ethical criticism and was able to tear apart and decipher Hitler’s hatred for the Jews and his underlying plans to use the German nation to carry out the extermination of the Jew’s entire race and belief systems.

I don’t think that Burke had any prejudices ideals for Hitler until he read Hitler’s book and discovered his plans to take over the world and his plans for creating a purified master race. He also expresses concerns for the people of Germany, because Hitler is preying upon an already weakened social, political, and religious structure of a nation that has been beaten and broken by the loss of World War I. Hitler states that “Aryan” is “constructive”; the Jew is “destructive”; and the “Aryan,” to continue his construction, must destroy the Jewish destruction. The Aryan,
as the vessel of love, must *hate* the Jewish *hate.*" (Burke, p212.) I also believe that Burke had genuine and sympathetic morals toward the people of Germany, and he also had concerns for our own country when he analyzed Hitler’s work, and he also said what he felt on the subject at hand. He also used his own ideals and ideologies from his beliefs and knowledge, also using Freudian psychology, Dramatistic criticism, and ethical criticism as his foundation for his critical review of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf.* Using ethical criticism Burke tried to expose Hitler’s distortions to the critics. He also tried to prevent a “similar swindle” in America. (Burke, p205.)

I thought that it was very hard to read and follow at times during the reading. I believe that Burke didn’t have to do research into something that he ultimately created, because he already had the foundation from rhetoricians before him. I think that it was organized as well as any other critique that I’ve read to date. I didn’t really enjoy reading it because it was hard to follow, but I did like what I understood simply because I’ve always been fascinated by the genius of Hitler. Don’t get me wrong Hitler was as close to the Devil as a man could ever be, but he still seduced, manipulated, and persuaded an entire nation of people into following him and executing every one of his commands no matter how immoral and unjust that they were. I might recommend this article to students that were analyzing and critiquing subjects such as war, propaganda, genocide, etc. Overall I think that Kenneth Burke had a brilliant way of looking at things, if a person can decipher it and apply accordingly.


Burke, K. (1941). The Rhetoric of Hitler’s “Battle”.