

Joseph Goebbels explained his Führer's aversion as a consequence of his respect for "the animal element" in humankind:

The Führer is deeply religious, though completely anti-Christian. He views Christianity as a symptom of decay. Rightly so. It is a branch of the Jewish race. . . . Both [Judaism and Christianity] have no point of contact to the animal element, and thus, in the end, they will be destroyed. The Führer is a convinced vegetarian, on principle. His arguments cannot be refuted on any serious basis. They are totally unanswerable.⁴²

Unanswerable, perhaps, but Goebbels himself seems not to have been moved, judging from the fact that he continued to eat meat until he poisoned himself, his wife, and his five young children in the final days of the war.

Hitler appears to have given up meat in 1931, though the reasons behind his decision (if reasons are to be expected in such matters) are not entirely clear. Several of his biographers point to the influence of the nationalist antisemitic composer, Richard Wagner. In an 1881 essay, Wagner had claimed that the human race had become contaminated and impure through racial mixing and the eating of animal flesh (the original human diet in his view, too, was vegetarian); a new kind of socialism was needed to purify Germany of these twin evils, calling upon "true and hearty fellowship with the vegetarians, the protectors of animals, and the friends of temperance" to save the German people from Jewish aggression. Wagner claimed that abstaining from a fleshy diet would allow a human moral redemption—possibly even for the Jews.⁴³ Hitler seems to have taken at least part of the message to heart: "I don't touch meat largely because of what Wagner says on the subject."⁴⁴

Hitler is said to have been unable to tolerate the idea of animals' being killed for human consumption, but at least one author has countered that this was an image deliberately crafted to popularize the German leader as kind and gentle.⁴⁵ Animal-rights historians Arnold Arluke and Boria Sax have noted that both claims may be true; they also point to a report from the 1940s—by an American—

that Hitler gave up meat because of problems with digestion. Whatever his original motivation (the suggestion has also been made that the death of his niece somehow provoked his revulsion for meat),⁴⁶ the Nazi leader himself credited his dietary change with having greatly increased his health and stamina. In his meat-eating phase, he had sweated profusely during his long ranting speeches—losing four to seven pounds in the course of an evening—but once he gave up meat, he said, the sweating stopped. Later, in the 1940s, he characterized his wolfhound, Blondi, as a vegetarian—instructing visitors that the dog's grass-eating habits had helped her with her colic.⁴⁷ Vegetarianism was not the only idiosyncrasy in Hitler's diet: he had a lifelong sweet tooth and was known to have consumed as much as two pounds of chocolate in a day.⁴⁸ He also had a rather bizarre and lifelong fascination with crayfish, lobsters, and crabs, which some scholars have traced (spuriously, in my view) to the fact that the German word for such creatures (*Krebs*) is the same as that for cancer.⁴⁹

It is often said that Hitler worried about getting cancer, though the evidence on this is somewhat sketchy. We do know that he had the Dachau physician Gustav Freiherr von Pohl examine his Reichskanzlei (Chancellery) for "earth rays" (*Erdstrahlen*) by means of a dowsing rod of some sort in September of 1934.⁵⁰ ("Earth rays" were popularly said to cause cancer⁵¹ and occasionally reappear in quack healing literature even today—see chapter 7.) We also know that Hitler suffered from stomach cramps, which he apparently interpreted as the early signs of cancer.⁵² The suggestion has been made that his mother's death from cancer in 1907 may have added to his dread: Klara Hitler died from breast cancer while under the care of a Jewish physician, Eduard Bloch, prompting speculation that some of his antisemitism may have sprouted from this seed.⁵³

Hitler was not the only "vegetarian" in the Nazi entourage. Himmler was big fan of both natural healing ("every doctor should be a nature doctor") and raw vegetables; he believed that "eastern peoples" had healthier bodies (and longer colons) in consequence of their vegetarian diets. Like Hitler, he too suffered from