

Background information

Most historians agree that Adolph Hitler, and his wife Eva, committed suicide on 30 April 1945 whilst in the bunker to which they had retreated during the Battle of Berlin. Accounts differ on the cause of their deaths, some suggesting cyanide was used as poison, others suggesting Hitler used a gun to shoot himself in the mouth. Soviet records suggest that their bodies were then burnt outside the bunker.



Almost immediately after the end of the war, however, some people began to claim that Hitler had in fact survived and escaped Germany. The idea was given credence by Stalin's refusal to confirm Hitler's death. Those supporting the theory later argued that he lived in Argentina with Eva and their children. Declassified FBI documents suggested that there had been sightings of Hitler, but the FBI itself has always refused to verify them. Many other Nazi war criminals were later found to have escaped to South America.

A recent book and documentary *Grey Wolf: Hitler's Escape to Argentina* (2012) by Simon Dunstan and Gerrard Williams has once more brought the conspiracy theory to public attention. Some historians have dismissed the book calling it 'an absolute disgrace' to which there is 'no substance at all' (Guy Walters).

Your task is to evaluate the evidence in order to reach your own conclusion. Does it support the fact of his death in 1945 or could it be interpreted differently?

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Evidence

Evidence A

'German men and women, soldiers of the German army, our Fuhrer, Adolf Hitler has fallen at his command post in the Reich Chancellery fighting to the last breath against Bolshevism and for Germany. At the end of his struggle he met a hero's death in the capital of the German Reich.'

A radio broadcast by Admiral Doenitz on 1 May 1945

Evidence B

Grand Admiral Doenitz

Most secret Urgent Officer only

1 May

The Fuhrer died yesterday. His will of 29th April appoints you as Reich president. Time and form of announcement is left to you.

Confirm receipt.

Goebbels.

A telegram found in Admiral Doenitz's papers by American soldiers after his capture

Evidence C

'As we entered we saw the Fuhrer sitting on a small divan. The Fuhrer was only slightly slumped forward and everyone recognised that he was dead. His jaw was hung somewhat loosely down and a pistol lay on the floor. Blood was dripping from both temples, and his mouth was bloody and smeared, but there was not much blood smattered about. I believe that Hitler took poison first and then shot himself through the mouth.'

Part of a statement made by Artur Axmann shortly after his capture

Evidence D

'There, almost upright in a sitting position on a couch was the body of Adolf Hitler. A small hole showed on his right temple and a trickle of blood ran slowly down his cheek. One pistol, a Walther 7.65 lay on the floor where it had dropped from his right hand.'

Heinz Linge, interviewed by an English newspaper in 1955

Evidence E

A Russian soldier claimed to have found a badly burned corpse in the garden of the chancellery building on 5 May 1945.

Russian scientists wrote a report on 8 May 1945:

'Since the body parts are heavily charred it is impossible to describe the features of the dead man. But the following could be established:

- a. Stature about 156 cm
- b. Age: between 50 and 60 years
- c. The most important anatomical findings for identification of the person are the teeth
- d. Part of the skull is missing'

From *The Death of Adolf Hitler* by Lev Bezymenski published in 1968

Evidence F

When President Truman asked Joseph Stalin at the Potsdam conference in 1945 whether or not Hitler was dead, Stalin replied bluntly, 'No.'

Evidence G

Report written by scientists after they investigated the body:

'On the body, considerably damaged by fire, no visible signs of severe injuries or illnesses could be detected. The presence in the mouth of the remains of a crushed glass container and the marked smell of bitter almonds coming from the body, and the forensic chemical test which established the presence of cyanide compounds, permit the commission to arrive to the conclusion that death was caused by poisoning with cyanide.'

From *The death of Adolf Hitler*, 1968

Evidence H

'A Russian officer stated that Hitler's dentist confirmed the body was Hitler's on 9 May 1945.'

From *The death of Adolf Hitler*, 1968

Evidence I

'Captured by partisans during the general uprising of northern Italy, Mussolini and his mistress Clara Petacci had been executed, and their bodies suspended by the feet in the market place of Milan to be beaten and pelted by the vindictive crowd. If the full details were ever known to them, Hitler and Eva Braun could only have repeated the orders they had already given: their bodies were to be destroyed 'so that nothing remains'; 'I will not fall into the hands of an enemy who requires a new spectacle to divert his hysterical masses'. (...) Hitler went into a frenzy, shouting: "This will never happen to me!" '

The Last Days of Hitler, 1947 by Dr H. R Trevor-Roper

Evidence J

'The Police Gazette was given access to reports in State Department files from Bogata, Columbia, which give eye-witness accounts of Hitler's movements from the time he left Norway May 2. ... These documents are photostatic copies of eyewitness reports of Hitler's arrival and stop-over in Columbia.

These documents comprise the stories of two men who worked to help Hitler hide in Columbia. One of them is still a self-confessed Nazi, who gives as his reason for revealing Hitler's past whereabouts: "My only intention is to inform the world that the Savior of the West is alive, and very much so; ready to assume his leading position against Communism, which threatens to spread over the planet like an enslaving and bloody horde."

From an issue of the *Police Gazette* in 1968. This American magazine claimed to be about matters of interest to the police but featured tabloid-style articles with lurid details of murders, sports features and photos of women wearing few clothes.

Person profiles

Admiral Doenitz

The new ruler of Germany after Hitler's death. He had fled Berlin on 21st April.

Joseph Goebbels

One of Hitler's most trusted assistants. He was responsible for propaganda. Goebbels and his wife committed suicide and poisoned their six children on 1st May 1945.

Artur Axmann

Leader of the Hitler Youth. He was arrested by British and American soldiers in December 1945.

Heinz Linge

Hitler's servant in 1945. In May 1945 he was captured by the Russians and remained a prisoner of the Russians until 1955.

Lev Bezymenski

Author of *The Death of Adolf Hitler*, 1968. Co - editor of the Soviet journal *Novoe Vremia*. He was an interpreter during the war and was present at the Battle of Berlin.

Hugh Trevor Roper

In 1945, he was appointed by British Intelligence in Germany to investigate conflicting evidence surrounding Hitler's final days and to produce a report on his death.

Questions to help interrogate the evidence

Evidence A

1. What impression does this give you of how Hitler died?
2. Was Doenitz there?
3. Do you think he knew how he had died?
4. How might he have heard the news?

Evidence B

We know that Hitler married Eva Braun, in the bunker, on 29 April 1945. He also wrote a last will and testament on this day.

Does this give you any clues as to how he may have died?

Evidence C

1. Why might you question the reliability of this source?
2. What language does he use that suggests uncertainty?
3. Do you think that captured Nazis might have alter their stories to suit their allied captors?

Evidence D

1. Does this source agree with Axmann's account?
2. Why might you question its reliability?
3. Does the fact it is so specific make you question it?

Evidence E

1. What does this suggest happened to Hitler?
2. What are the problems with this source?
3. Why do you think Hitler may have been burned?
4. Who do you think may have burned him?
5. Why do you think the Russians may have taken his body?

Evidence F

Can you think of any reasons why Stalin might have wanted to deny Hitler's death?

Evidence G

Why might the Russians want to forward this view?

What is not addressed from the previous source?

How do you think the German people would have felt knowing Hitler had killed himself?

Evidence H

There are historians who believe the German dentists were part of a conspiracy to cover up the death from Stalin.

Evidence summary chart

	Suggests Hitler lived or died?	Main points	How strongly does it influence your view?
A			
B			
C			
D			
E			
F			
G			
H			
I			
J			

Teaching notes

This activity was originally planned for a Y9 GCSE class. It might make a nice stand-alone source activity for various purposes.

Possible Starters

The trailer to *Grey wolf* might make an intriguing start to the question:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XsuZUggi4I> (link accurate at time of publication.)

Students could be asked to think about why a book and documentary on this topic might still be popular.

Main task

This could be approached in several ways - as a carousel, in groups or as a whole class. Ask students to evaluate each piece of evidence and decide whether it indicates that Hitler lived or died, and how strongly. They could use the table on p. 8 to keep track of their thoughts. They should consult the person profiles and interrogation questions for Evidence A-H to assist them in evaluating the evidence.

Plenary

An interactive Magnet activity is available to help structure a whole class discussion - this could be used as a plenary at any point during the lesson. Ask volunteers to place each piece of evidence on the continuum from 'Strongly suggests Hitler died' to 'Strongly suggests Hitler lived' and then to justify their positioning.