

'The most destructive weapon of all time'

The phone Adolf Hitler used to arrange genocide and murder has fetched nearly £200,000 at auction. Is a phone a weapon? And do its owner's actions make it deadlier than a gun or a bomb?



Hitler's phone: The headset was specially designed not to be dislodged when on the move.

In May 1945 Brigadier Sir Ralph Rayner entered the ruins of Berlin. He was a senior officer in the British army and Nazi Germany had just surrendered. When he arrived, his Russian counterparts offered him a tour of Adolf Hitler's bunker.

They walked down a flight of stairs and into a corridor, over fifty feet below ground. In Hitler's room they found a red phone, engraved with a swastika and the Fuhrer's name. The Russians handed it to Rayner as a gift.

For decades he and his family hid it from view. But now it has fetched \$243,000 at a US auction, after his son Ranulf put it up for sale.

"It was arguably the most destructive weapon of all time," said a spokesman for the auction house as he promoted it. "It would be impossible to find a more impactful relic than the primary tool used by the most evil man in history."

The phone was an inanimate witness to a terrible period of history. But was it a weapon? For two years Hitler used it to arrange millions

of Jews' deaths; deliver instructions to generals fighting the second world war; and order executions.

"This was Hitler's personal instrument of death," says Ranulf Rayner. "It is a very sinister piece of equipment."

The phone played a more abstract role in Hitler's crimes than a gun or poison gas. But our definition of weapons is malleable; in recent years, for example, drones and cyber warfare have allowed much more remote methods of killing. Perhaps other tools used to order mass murder could also be considered weapons — such as the pen Stalin used to sign many thousands of death warrants.

And how much of a role do weapons play in killing? Tragedies such as gun massacres and genocides are caused by an accumulation of several events and decisions. In the USA advocates for gun rights often use the phrase "guns don't kill people, people kill people".

This suggests responsibility for murder lies higher up the causal chain — with the person

who decided to kill. The objects used by those at the top of that chain could thus be the most significant weapons of all.

Called up

This was the appliance that an evil mass killer needed to carry out his warped plans, say some. Nothing could better represent his responsibility for the Holocaust and the second world war. When Hitler made one of his murderous decisions, he picked up the phone. And without those decisions, millions would have lived.

The phone was just a means of communicating, respond others. It simply made Hitler's job of issuing orders a little easier. A weapon is an object which people use to cause someone harm — a bomb, a gun, a poison-gas canister. These are the true killers: without them, even an evil man armed with a phone could have done little.



Q: This is just a phone. Why would it interest anyone?

A: The phone provides us with a direct link to the bloodiest conflict in history — the second world war — and its greatest crime, the Holocaust. It reminds us of the uncomfortable

fact that behind Hitler's monstrous actions lay a human, who used an ordinary telephone to set in motion vile deeds. This phone can give you an important insight into the worst aspects of the species you are a part of.

Q: But the second world war happened over 70 years ago.

A: You can still learn a great deal from it. It

shines a light on human nature, and its outcome has helped to shape our world today. It has changed the people who have power and the way they make decisions. And studying such a traumatic period can help to make you a better, more knowledgeable person.

YOU DECIDE

1. Which worry you more: evil people's decisions or the weapons they use?
2. Was Hitler's phone a weapon?

ACTIVITIES

1. Study the image of Hitler's phone above this article. In pairs, list five things you can infer from it. Then list five questions you would like to ask about it.
2. Find out more about a seemingly innocuous object which was part of an important episode in history. Prepare a three-minute presentation to your class, explaining what we can learn from it.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

"The deadliest weapon of all is the human mind."

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WORD WATCH

Hid – When he returned to Britain, Rayner showed the phone to his immediate family. But he did not tell anyone else about it, fearing he would be accused of looting and court martialled. Shortly before his death in 1977 he gave the phone to his son.

\$243,000 – Equivalent to £195,744.

Auction –

Hitler memorabilia often perform well at auctions. In 2009 a signed copy of *Mein Kampf* sold for £21,000. In 2015 a collection of Hitler's art sold for £286,000. And last year an Argentinian man spent £465,000 on material from the Nazi era – prompting concern that Hitler sympathisers were collecting and venerating it.

Two – The Wehrmacht (armed forces) provided the phone in 1943. Hitler used it at various command posts, and transported it when he

moved, until he killed himself in his bunker in 1945.

Executions – One of Hitler's final calls was to authorise the death of his brother-in-law for treason. In his last days he also instructed his henchmen to torch his apartments after his suicide.

Sign – With one signature, Stalin gave personal approval for the murder of 22,000 Polish officers at Katyn in 1940.

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 Notes