



A moody and bitter man, Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) devoted all his interest and energy to politics. His impassioned speeches, fired by hatred and suspicion, swayed many Germans to support his cause.

In fiery political speeches throughout Germany in the late 1920s, Adolf Hitler proclaimed his dark vision of humanity's future. An extremely powerful and appealing speaker, he screamed and shouted his evil message to a growing number of followers.

Hitler preached that the strong must trample and rule the weak. Only violence and war could once again make Germany a mighty empire, he said. He longed to

see his political party, the National Socialists, or Nazis, rule Germany and make Germans into what he called a master race. The fact that Hitler almost achieved his dream is one of modern history's most brutal, tragic chapters.

Hitler was born in 1889 on the Austrian–German border, the son of a customs officer. He grew up shy, sickly, and prone to hysterical outbursts. He quit high school to become a painter. Twice he failed

an entrance exam to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Hitler then worked as a commercial artist in a series of odd jobs. Soon he fell into poverty and lived in a run-down men's residence. Much of Hitler's hatred for society is believed to have been fueled by these grim years in Vienna.

World War I, he said later, gave him a way out of despair. The war promised great adventure. Wounded twice while serving in the German army, he became a corporal and was awarded an Iron Cross. Yet Germany's surrender in 1918 devastated him.

Hitler's Two Enemies

After World War I, Hitler became involved in politics. He ranted about Germany's two great enemies. One enemy, he said, was the group of "traitors" who had "stabbed Germany in the back." These were

the politicians who had surrendered at the end of the war, and signed the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler raged at the huge cash payments the treaty required of Germany as repayment for the Allies' war costs. Such concessions humiliated Germany, he argued.

The other enemy, claimed Hitler, was the Jews. Hitler strongly promoted the anti-Jewish ideas of his time. He believed that this small but powerful minority group was to blame for Germany's economic woes. Hitler's exceptionally extreme hatred of both the Versailles Treaty and Jews became the basis of his political platform.

Why did so many Germans believe his message? Hitler rose to power during the Depression of the 1930s. He promised jobs, food, the return of dignity—and greatness—if he were in power.

In 1923, the Nazis planned an over-



World War I left Germany riddled with poverty. By the 1920s, money was nearly worthless, and food supplies scarce. In this 1923 photograph, German housewives wait in long lines hoping to buy meat for their families. Such impoverished conditions fed the bitterness that led to World War II.

throw of Germany's government. But when the Nazis tried to take power in Munich, the police stopped them and arrested Hitler. He was thrown into prison, where he wrote his famous autobiography, *Mein Kampf* (mine kahmf), which means "my struggle." In his book, Hitler revealed his plans to retake the lands Germany had lost in the Versailles Treaty. Germany would also seize "living space" in Eastern Europe, and in the Soviet Union. Finally, Hitler vowed to deal with what he called the Jewish question.

Rise of Nazism

After his release from prison, Hitler devoted his life to building the Nazi party into Germany's strongest political force. He won the support of many conservative military leaders and businessmen. They believed that only Hitler's severe measures could save Germany from a communist takeover.

In the 1932 election, Hitler ran against German President Paul von Hindenburg. Hitler received almost 40 percent of the vote. In 1933, Hindenburg appointed him **chancellor** (high state official). Within months, Hitler turned the government into his own personal dictatorship. He became the *führer*, or "leader."

Overnight, Germans lost their civil rights. Labor unions and all other political parties except the Nazi party were outlawed. Hitler lashed out at democrats and communists alike. German Jews were forbidden to marry non-Jews, teach, or work as doctors. Hitler's secret police, the

Gestapo, shot or jailed thousands of his "enemies."

The Nazis shut down opposing newspapers, and burned books they hated. They drove Jews and other minorities from their jobs and businesses. Many Germans fled this shocking reign of terror.

The Third Reich

In 1934, Hitler began to prepare Germany for an upcoming war. "Conquest is not only a right, but a duty," he told the German people. Today, Hitler bragged, the Nazis rule Germany. Tomorrow, he promised, they would control the world. Hitler rebuilt the German army and air force. War production made the factories busy, and the economy picked up. Many Germans started to think of Hitler as their hero. He called his German empire the **Third Reich**, after two earlier German empires.

In 1936, Hitler moved on to the rest of his plan. He sent troops into the Rhine-



Hitler spread his hatred of Jews across Germany. Attacks on Jews increased, and many Jewish homes and businesses became targets of violence. This photograph shows a Jewish family being expelled from their home in March 1939.



land, the demilitarized area of Germany bordering France. When France and England failed to react, Hitler grew bolder. He annexed Austria, a German-speaking country south of Germany.

How did Americans react to Hitler? At first, most did not take him seriously, though many were concerned. In 1937, President Roosevelt began to warn the public of Hitler's menace. However, the United States did not act. Was not the country safe, protected by two oceans? The best course, most Americans believed, was to stay neutral.

"The German student fights for the Führer and the People," declares this German propaganda of the 1930s. One group manipulated to help spread Hitler's word and support his work was Germany's young people—the "Hitler Youth."

CHAPTER CHECK

WORD MATCH

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| 1. Nazis | a. the German empire under Hitler from 1933 to 1945 |
| 2. Gestapo | b. the German political party during Hitler's time in power, National Socialists |
| 3. chancellor | c. Hitler's secret police |
| 4. führer | d. high official of state |
| 5. Third Reich | e. title meaning "leader" in German |

QUICK QUIZ

- Who were Hitler's two "enemies" and why was he able to win people to his cause?
- Name some steps Hitler took to eliminate any political opposition.

THINK ABOUT IT

- Why do you think so many people believed Hitler when he said that Jews were to blame for Germany's economic problems?
- What do you think Hitler meant when he said, "Conquest is not only a right, but a duty"?

