

How Did Adolf Hitler Happen?

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Top Photo: Adolf Hitler giving the Nazi salute at a rally in Nuremberg in 1928. (Image: National Archives and Records Administration, 242-HAP-1928(46).)

Adolf Hitler (April 20, 1889 - April 30, 1945) was appointed chancellor of Germany in 1933 following a series of electoral victories by the Nazi Party. He ruled absolutely until his death by suicide in April 1945. Upon achieving power, Hitler smashed the nation's democratic institutions and transformed Germany into a war state intent on conquering Europe for the benefit of the so-called Aryan race. His [invasion of Poland](#) on September 1, 1939, triggered the European phase of World War II. During the course of the war, Nazi military forces rounded up and [executed 11 million victims](#) they deemed inferior or undesirable—"life unworthy of life"—among them Jews, Slavs, homosexuals, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Hitler had supreme authority as führer (leader or guide), but could not have risen to power or committed such atrocities on his own. He had the active support of the powerful German officer class and of millions of everyday citizens who voted for the National Socialist German Workers' (Nazi) Party and hailed him as a national savior in gigantic stadium rallies.

How were Hitler and the Nazis possible? How did such odious characters take and hold power in a country that was a world pacesetter in literature, art, architecture, and science, a nation that had a democratic government and a free press in the 1920s?

Adolf Hitler's Rise to Power

Hitler rose to power through the Nazi Party, an organization he forged after returning as a wounded veteran from the annihilating trench warfare of World War I. He and other patriotic Germans were outraged and humiliated by the harsh terms of [the Treaty of Versailles](#), which the Allies compelled the new German government, the Weimar Republic, to accept along with an obligation to pay \$33 billion in war reparations. Germany also had to give up its prized overseas colonies and surrender valued parcels of home territory to France and Poland. The German army was radically downsized and the nation forbidden to have submarines or an air force. "We shall squeeze the German lemon until the pips squeak!" explained one British official.

Paying the crushing reparations destabilized the economy, producing ruinous, runaway inflation. By September 1923, four billion German marks had the equal value of one American dollar. Consumers needed a wheelbarrow to carry enough paper money to buy a loaf of bread.

Hitler, a mesmerizing public speaker, addressed political meetings in Munich calling for a new German order to replace what he saw as an incompetent and inefficient democratic regime. This New Order was distinguished by an authoritarian political system based on a leadership structure in which authority flowed downward from a supreme national leader.

In the new Germany, all citizens would unselfishly serve the state, or Volk; democracy would be abolished; and individual rights sacrificed for the good of the führer state. The ultimate aim of the Nazi Party was to seize power through Germany's parliamentary system, install Hitler as dictator, and create a community of racially pure Germans loyal to their führer, who would lead them in a campaign of racial cleansing and world conquest.

"Either victory of the Aryan, or annihilation of the Aryan and the victory of the Jew."

Adolf Hitler

Hitler blamed the Weimar Republic's weakness on the influence of Germany's Jewish and communist minorities, who he claimed were trying to take over the country. "There are only two possibilities," he told a Munich audience in 1922. "Either victory of the Aryan, or annihilation of the Aryan and the victory of the Jew." The young Hitler saw history as a process of racial struggle, with the strongest race—the Aryan race—ultimately prevailing by force of arms. "Mankind has grown great in eternal war," Hitler wrote. "It would decay in eternal peace."

Jews represented everything the Nazis found repugnant: finance capitalism (controlled, the Nazis believed, by powerful Jewish financiers), international communism (Karl Marx was a German Jew, and the leadership of the German Communist Party was heavily Jewish), and modernist cultural movements like psychoanalysis and swing music.

Nazi Party foreign policy aimed to [rid Europe of Jews and other "inferior" peoples](#), absorb pure-blooded Aryans into a greatly expanded Germany—a "Third Reich"—and wage unrelenting war on the Slavic "hordes" of Russia, considered by Hitler to be Untermenschen (subhuman).

Once conquered, the Soviet Union would be ruled by the German master race, which would exterminate or subdue millions of Slavs to create lebensraum (living space) for their own farms and communities. In a conquered and racially cleansed Russia, they would work on model farms and factories connected to the homeland by new highways, called autobahns.

Hitler was the ideologue as well as the chief organizer of the Nazi Party. By 1921, the party had a newspaper, an official flag, and a private army—the Sturmabteilung SA (storm troopers)—made up largely of unemployed and disenfranchised WWI veterans. By 1923, the SA had grown to 15,000 men and had access to hidden stores of weapons. That year, Hitler and WWI hero General Erich Ludendorff attempted to overthrow the elected regional government of Bavaria in a coup known as the Beer Hall Putsch.

The regular army crushed the rebellion and Hitler spent a year in prison—in loose confinement. In Landsberg Prison, Hitler dictated most of the first volume of his political autobiography, *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle). The book brought together, in inflamed language, the racialist and expansionist ideas he had been propagating in his popular beer-hall harangues.

After being released from prison, Hitler vowed to work within the parliamentary system to avoid a repeat of the Beer Hall Putsch setback. In the 1920s, however, the Nazi Party was still a fringe group of ultraextremists with little political power. It received only 2.6 percent of the vote in the Reichstag elections of 1928.

But the worldwide economic depression and the rising power of labor unions and communists convinced increasing numbers of Germans to turn to the Nazi Party. The Nazis fed on bank failures and unemployment—proof, Hitler said, of the ineffectiveness of democratic government. Hitler pledged to restore prosperity, create civil order (by crushing industrial strikes and street demonstrations by communists and socialists), eliminate the influence of Jewish financiers, and make the fatherland once again a world power.



- Adolf Hitler and German President Paul von Hindenburg, shortly after Hindenburg asked Hitler to become chancellor in 1933. (Image: Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-S38324.)



- Adolf Hitler giving the Nazi salute at a rally in Nuremberg in 1928. (*Image: National Archives and Records Administration, 242-HAP-1928(46).*)

By 1932, the Nazis were the largest political party in the Reichstag. In January of the following year, with no other leader able to command sufficient support to govern, President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Hitler chancellor of Germany. Shortly thereafter, a fire broke out in the Reichstag building in Berlin, and authorities arrested a young Dutch communist who confessed to starting it.

Hitler used this episode to convince President Hindenburg to declare an emergency decree suspending many civil liberties throughout Germany, including freedom of the press, freedom of expression, and the right to hold public assemblies. The police were authorized to detain citizens without cause, and the authority usually exercised by regional governments became subject to control by Hitler's national regime.

Almost immediately, Hitler began dismantling Germany's democratic institutions and imprisoning or murdering his chief opponents. When Hindenburg died the following year, Hitler took the titles of führer, chancellor, and commander in chief of the army. He expanded the army tremendously, reintroduced conscription, and began developing a new air force—all violations of the Treaty of Versailles.

Hitler's military spending and ambitious public-works programs, including building a German autobahn, helped restore prosperity. His regime also suppressed the Communist Party and purged his own paramilitary storm troopers, whose violent street demonstrations alienated the German middle class.

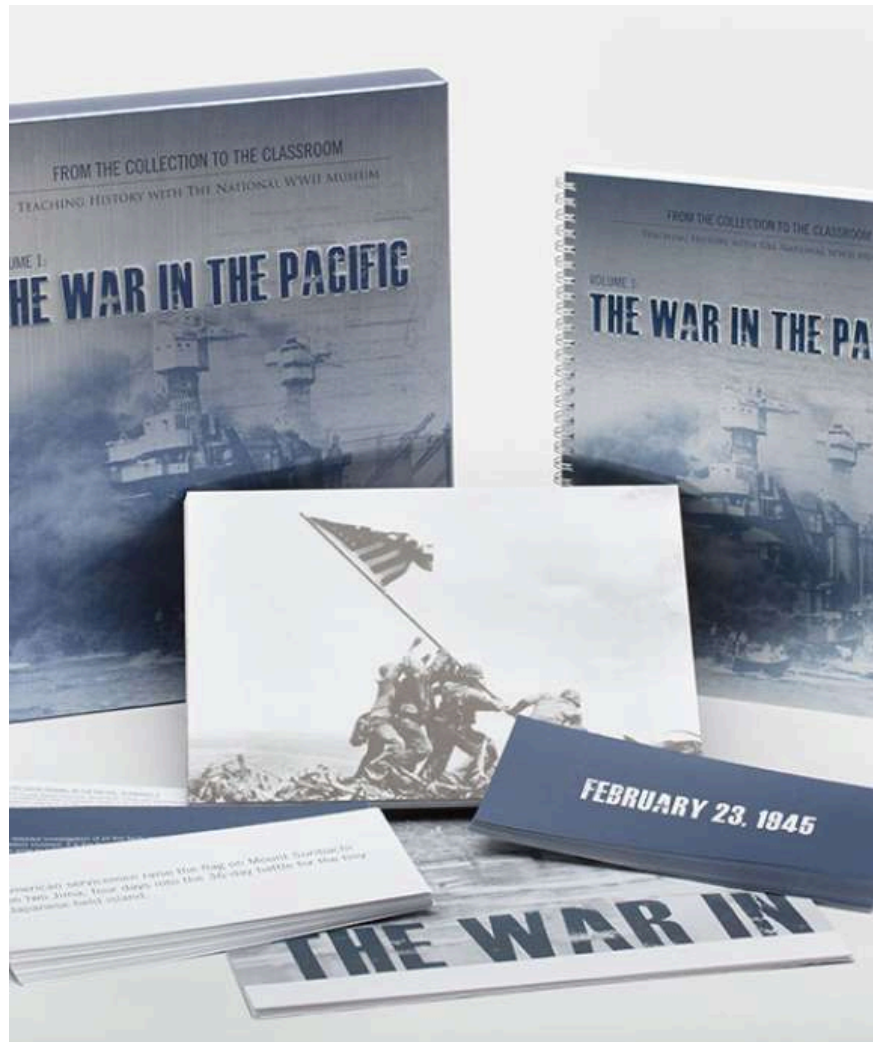
This bloodletting—called the “Night of the Long Knives”—was hugely popular and welcomed by the middle class as a blow struck for law and order. In fact, many Germans went along with the full range of Hitler’s policies, convinced that they would ultimately be advantageous for the country.

In 1938, Hitler began his long-promised expansion of national boundaries to incorporate ethnic Germans. He colluded with Austrian Nazis to orchestrate the Anschluss, the annexation of Austria to Germany. And in Hitler’s most brazenly aggressive act yet, Czechoslovakia was forced to surrender the Sudetenland, a mountainous border region populated predominantly by ethnic Germans.

The Czechs looked to Great Britain and France for help, but hoping to avoid war—they had been bled white in World War I—these nations chose a policy of appeasement. At a conclave held at Munich in September 1938, representatives of Great Britain and France compelled Czech leaders to cede the Sudetenland in return for Hitler’s pledge not to seek additional territory. The following year, the German army swallowed up the remainder of Czechoslovakia.

British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, one of the signers of [the Munich pact](#), had taken Hitler at his word. Returning to Britain with this agreement in hand, he proudly announced that he had achieved “peace with honor. I believe it is peace for our time.”

A year later, German troops [stormed into Poland](#).



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