

Adolf Hitler



Hitler, Adolf

Adolf Hitler, c. 1933.

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Adolf Hitler

Adolf Hitler reviewing troops on the Eastern Front, 1939.

Heinrich Hoffmann, Munich

Adolf Hitler, byname **Der Führer** (**German: “The Leader”**), (born April 20, 1889, Braunau am Inn, Austria—died April 30, 1945, Berlin, Germany), leader of the Nazi Party (from 1920/21) and chancellor (*Kanzler*) and Führer of Germany (1933–45). He was chancellor from January 30, 1933, and, after President Paul von Hindenburg’s death, assumed the twin titles of Führer and chancellor (August 2, 1934).

Hitler’s father, Alois (born 1837), was illegitimate. For a time he bore his mother’s name, Schicklgruber, but by 1876 he had established his family claim to the surname Hitler. Adolf never used any other surname.

Early life

After his father’s retirement from the state customs service, Adolf Hitler spent most of his childhood in Linz, the capital of Upper Austria. It remained his favourite city throughout his life, and he expressed his wish to be buried there. Alois Hitler died in 1903 but left an adequate pension and savings to support his wife and children. Although Hitler feared and disliked his father, he was a devoted son to his mother, who died after much suffering in 1907. With a mixed record as a student, Hitler never advanced beyond a secondary education. After leaving school, he visited Vienna, then returned to Linz, where he dreamed of becoming an artist. Later, he used the small allowance he continued to draw to maintain himself in Vienna. He wished to study art, for which he had some faculties, but he twice failed to secure entry to the Academy of Fine Arts. For some years he lived a lonely and isolated life, earning a precarious livelihood by painting postcards and advertisements and drifting from one municipal hostel to another. Hitler already showed traits that characterized his later life: loneliness and

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secretiveness, a bohemian mode of everyday existence, and hatred of cosmopolitanism and of the multinational character of Vienna.

In 1913 Hitler moved to Munich. Screened for Austrian military service in February 1914, he was classified as unfit because of inadequate physical vigour; but when World War I broke out, he petitioned Bavarian King Louis III to be allowed to serve, and one day after submitting that request, he was notified that he would be permitted to join the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment. After some eight weeks of training, Hitler was deployed in October 1914 to Belgium, where he participated in the First Battle of Ypres. He served throughout the war, was wounded in October 1916, and was gassed two years later near Ypres. He was hospitalized when the conflict ended. During the war, he was continuously in the front line as a headquarters runner; his bravery in action was rewarded with the Iron Cross, Second Class, in December 1914, and the Iron Cross, First Class (a rare decoration for a corporal), in August 1918. He greeted the war with enthusiasm, as a great relief from the frustration and aimlessness of civilian life. He found discipline and comradeship satisfying and was confirmed in his belief in the heroic virtues of war.

Rise to power

Discharged from the hospital amid the social chaos that followed Germany's defeat, Hitler took up political work in Munich in May–June 1919. As an army political agent, he joined the small German Workers' Party in Munich (September 1919). In 1920 he was put in charge of the party's propaganda and left the army to devote himself to improving his position within the party, which in that year was renamed the National-sozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (Nazi). Conditions were ripe for the development of such a party. Resentment at the loss of the war and the severity of the peace terms added to the economic woes and brought widespread discontent. This was especially sharp in Bavaria, due to its traditional separatism and the region's popular dislike of the republican government in Berlin. In March 1920 a coup d'état by a few army officers attempted in vain to establish a right-wing government.

Munich was a gathering place for dissatisfied former servicemen and members of the Freikorps, which had been organized in 1918–19 from units of the German army that were unwilling to return to civilian life, and for political plotters against the republic. Many of these joined the Nazi Party. Foremost among them was Ernst Röhm, a staff member of the district army command, who had joined the German Workers' Party before Hitler and who was of great help in furthering Hitler's rise within the party. It was he who recruited the "strong arm" squads used by Hitler to protect party meetings, to attack socialists and communists, and to exploit violence for the impression of strength it gave. In 1921 these squads were formally organized under Röhm into a private party army, the SA (Sturmabteilung). Röhm was also able to secure protection from the Bavarian government, which depended on the local army command for the maintenance of order and which tacitly accepted some of his terrorist tactics.



Adolf Hitler

Adolf Hitler, 1930s.

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Conditions were favourable for the growth of the small party, and Hitler was sufficiently astute to take full advantage of them. When he joined the party, he found it ineffective, committed to a program of nationalist and socialist ideas but uncertain of its aims and divided in its leadership. He accepted its program but regarded it as a means to an end. His propaganda and his personal ambition caused friction with the other leaders of the party. Hitler countered their attempts to curb him by threatening resignation, and because the future of the party depended on his power to organize publicity and to acquire funds, his opponents relented. In July 1921 he became their leader with almost unlimited powers. From the first he set out to create a mass movement, whose mystique and power would be sufficient to bind its members in loyalty to him. He engaged in unrelenting propaganda through the party newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter* ("Popular Observer," acquired in 1920), and through meetings whose audiences soon grew from a handful to thousands. With his charismatic personality and dynamic leadership, he attracted a devoted cadre of Nazi leaders, men whose names today live in infamy—Johann Dietrich Eckart (who acted as a mentor for Hitler), Alfred Rosenberg, Rudolf Hess, Hermann Göring, and Julius Streicher.

The climax of this rapid growth of the Nazi Party in Bavaria came in an attempt to seize power in the Munich (Beer Hall) *Putsch* of November 1923, when Hitler and General Erich Ludendorff tried to take advantage of the prevailing confusion and opposition to the Weimar Republic to force the leaders of the Bavarian government and the local army commander to proclaim a national revolution. In the melee that resulted, the police and the army fired at the advancing marchers, killing a few of them. Hitler was injured, and four policemen were killed. Placed on trial for treason, he characteristically took advantage of the immense publicity afforded to him. He also drew a vital lesson from the *Putsch*—that the movement must achieve power by legal means. He was sentenced to prison for five years but served only nine months, and those in relative comfort at Landsberg castle. Hitler used the time to dictate the first volume of *Mein Kampf*, his political autobiography as well as a compendium of his multitudinous ideas.

Hitler's ideas included inequality among races, nations, and individuals as part of an unchangeable natural order that exalted the "Aryan race" as the creative element of mankind. According to Hitler, the natural unit of mankind was the *Volk* ("the people"), of which the German people was the greatest. Moreover, he believed that the state existed to serve the *Volk*—a mission that to him the Weimar German Republic betrayed. All morality and truth were judged by this criterion: whether it was in accordance with the interest and preservation of the *Volk*. Parliamentary democratic government stood doubly condemned. It assumed the equality of individuals that for Hitler did not exist and supposed that what was in the interests of the *Volk* could be decided by parliamentary procedures.

Instead, Hitler argued that the unity of the *Volks* would find its incarnation in the Führer, endowed with perfect authority. Below the Führer the party was drawn from the *Volks* and was in turn its safeguard.

The greatest enemy of Nazism was not, in Hitler's view, liberal democracy in Germany, which was already on the verge of collapse. It was the rival *Weltanschauung*, Marxism (which for him embraced social democracy as well as communism), with its insistence on internationalism and economic conflict. Beyond Marxism he believed the greatest enemy of all to be the Jew, who was for Hitler the incarnation of evil. There is debate among historians as to when anti-Semitism became Hitler's deepest and strongest conviction. As early as 1919 he wrote, "Rational anti-Semitism must lead to systematic legal opposition. Its final objective must be the removal of the Jews altogether." In *Mein Kampf*, he described the Jew as the "destroyer of culture," "a parasite within the nation," and "a menace."

During Hitler's absence in prison, the Nazi Party languished as the result of internal dissension. After his release, Hitler faced difficulties that had not existed before 1923. Economic stability had been achieved by a currency reform and the Dawes Plan had scaled back Germany's World War I reparations. The republic seemed to have become more respectable. Hitler was forbidden to make speeches, first in Bavaria, then in many other German states (these prohibitions remained in force until 1927–28). Nevertheless, the party grew slowly in numbers, and in 1926 Hitler successfully established his position within it against Gregor Strasser, whose followers were primarily in northern Germany.

The advent of the Depression in 1929, however, led to a new period of political instability. In 1930 Hitler made an alliance with the Nationalist Alfred Hugenberg in a campaign against the Young Plan, a second renegotiation of Germany's war reparation payments. With the help of Hugenberg's newspapers, Hitler was able for the first time to reach a nationwide audience. The alliance also enabled him to seek support from many of the magnates of business and industry who controlled political funds and were anxious to use them to establish a strong right-wing, antisocialist government. The subsidies Hitler received from the industrialists placed his party on a secure financial footing and enabled him to make effective his emotional appeal to the lower middle class and the unemployed, based on the proclamation of his faith that Germany would awaken from its sufferings to reassert its natural greatness. Hitler's dealings with Hugenberg and the industrialists exemplify his skill in using those who sought to use him. But his most important achievement was the establishment of a truly national party (with its voters and followers drawn from different classes and religious groups), unique in Germany at the time.

Unremitting propaganda, set against the failure of the government to improve conditions during the Depression, produced a steadily mounting electoral strength for the Nazis. The party became the second largest in the country, rising from 2.6 percent of the vote in the national election of 1928 to more than 18 percent in September 1930. In 1932 Hitler opposed Hindenburg in the presidential election, capturing 36.8 percent of the votes on the second ballot. Finding himself in a strong position by virtue of his unprecedented mass following, he entered into a series of intrigues with conservatives such as Franz von Papen, Otto Meißner, and President Hindenburg's son, Oskar. The fear of communism and

the rejection of the Social Democrats bound them together. In spite of a decline in the Nazi Party's votes in November 1932, Hitler insisted that the chancellorship was the only office he would accept. On January 30, 1933, Hindenburg offered him the chancellorship of Germany. His cabinet included few Nazis at that point.



Hitler, Adolf

Adolf Hitler in Brunswick, Germany,
1931.

Photos.com/Jupiterimages

Hitler's life and habits

Hitler's personal life had grown more relaxed and stable with the added comfort that accompanied political success. After his release from prison, he often went to live on the Obersalzberg, near Berchtesgaden. His income at this time was derived from party funds and from writing for nationalist newspapers. He was largely indifferent to clothes and food but did not eat meat and gave up drinking beer (and all other alcohols). His rather irregular working schedule prevailed. He usually rose late, sometimes dawdled at his desk, and retired late at night.

At Berchtesgaden, his half sister Angela Raubal and her two daughters accompanied him. Hitler became devoted to one of them, Geli, and it seems that his possessive jealousy drove her to suicide in September 1931. For weeks Hitler was inconsolable. Some time later Eva Braun, a shop assistant from Munich, became his mistress. Hitler rarely allowed her to appear in public with him. He would not consider marriage on the grounds that it would hamper his career. Braun was a simple young woman with few intellectual

gifts. Her great virtue in Hitler's eyes was her unquestioning loyalty, and in recognition of this he legally married her at the end of his life.

Dictator, 1933–39

Once in power, Hitler established an absolute dictatorship. He secured the president's assent for new elections. The Reichstag fire, on the night of February 27, 1933 (apparently the work of a Dutch Communist, Marinus van der Lubbe), provided an excuse for a decree overriding all guarantees of freedom and for an intensified campaign of violence. In these conditions, when the elections were held (March 5), the Nazis polled 43.9 percent of the votes. On March 21 the Reichstag assembled in the Potsdam Garrison Church to demonstrate the unity of National Socialism with the old conservative Germany, represented by Hindenburg. Two days later the Enabling Bill, giving full powers to Hitler, was passed in the Reichstag by the combined votes of Nazi, Nationalist, and Centre party deputies (March 23, 1933). Less than three months later all non-Nazi parties, organizations, and labor unions ceased to exist. The disappearance of the Catholic Centre Party was followed by a German Concordat with the Vatican in July. (See [Adolf Hitler addressing the Reichstag](#).)



Adolf Hitler

Adolf Hitler addressing a rally, 1930s.

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Hitler had no desire to spark a radical revolution. Conservative “ideas” were still necessary if he was to succeed to the presidency and retain the support of the army; moreover, he did not intend to expropriate the leaders of industry, provided they served the interests of the Nazi state. Ernst Röhm, however, was a protagonist of the “continuing revolution”; he was also, as head of the SA, distrusted by the army. Hitler tried first to secure Röhm’s support for his policies by persuasion. Hermann Göring and Heinrich Himmler were eager to remove Röhm, but Hitler hesitated until the last moment. Finally, on June 29, 1934, he reached his decision. On the “Night of the Long Knives,” Röhm and his lieutenant Edmund Heines were executed without trial, along with Gregor Strasser, Kurt von Schleicher, and others.

The army leaders, satisfied at seeing the SA broken up, approved Hitler’s actions. When Hindenburg died on August 2, the army leaders, together with Papen, assented to the merging of the chancellorship and the presidency—with which went the supreme command of the armed forces of the *Reich*. Now officers and men took an oath of allegiance to Hitler personally. Economic recovery and a fast reduction in unemployment (coincident with world recovery, but for which Hitler took credit) made the regime increasingly popular, and a combination of success and police terror brought the support of 90 percent of the voters in a plebiscite.



Hitler, Adolf

Adolf Hitler addressing a rally in Germany, c. 1933.

dpa dena/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images

Hitler devoted little attention to the organization and running of the domestic affairs of the Nazi state. Responsible for the broad lines of policy, as well as for the system of terror that upheld the state, he left detailed administration to his subordinates. Each of these exercised arbitrary power in his own sphere; but by deliberately creating offices and organizations with overlapping authority, Hitler effectively prevented any one of these particular realms from ever becoming sufficiently strong to challenge his own absolute authority.

Foreign policy claimed his greater interest. As he had made clear in *Mein Kampf*, the reunion of the German peoples was his overriding ambition. Beyond that, the natural field of expansion lay eastward, in Poland, the Ukraine, and the U.S.S.R.—expansion that would necessarily involve renewal of Germany’s historic conflict with the



Hitler, Adolf

Adolf Hitler addressing a Nazi Party rally in Munich, Germany, in the 1930s.

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Röhm, Ernst

Ernst Röhm, 1933.

Heinrich Hoffmann, Munich

Slavic peoples, who would be subordinate in the new order to the Teutonic master race. He saw fascist Italy as his natural ally in this crusade. Britain was a possible ally, provided that it would abandon its traditional policy of maintaining the balance of power in Europe and limit itself to its interests overseas. In the west France remained the natural enemy of Germany and must, therefore, be cowed or subdued to make expansion eastward possible.

Before such expansion was possible, it was necessary to remove the restrictions placed on Germany at the end of World War I by the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler used all the arts of propaganda to allay the suspicions of the other powers. He posed as the champion of Europe against the scourge of Bolshevism and insisted that he was a man of peace who wished only to remove the inequalities of the Versailles Treaty. He withdrew from the Disarmament Conference and from the League of Nations (October 1933), and he signed a nonaggression treaty with Poland (January 1934). Every repudiation of the treaty was followed by an offer to negotiate a fresh agreement and insistence on the limited nature of Germany's ambitions. Only once did the Nazis overreach themselves: when Austrian Nazis, with the connivance of German organizations, murdered Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss of Austria and attempted a revolt (July 1934). The attempt failed, and Hitler disclaimed all responsibility. In January 1935 a plebiscite in the Saarland, with a more than 90 percent majority, returned that territory to Germany. In March of the same year, Hitler introduced conscription. Although this action provoked protests from Britain, France, and Italy, the opposition was restrained, and Hitler's peace diplomacy was sufficiently successful to persuade the British to negotiate a naval treaty (June 1935) recognizing Germany's right to a considerable navy. His greatest stroke came in March 1936, when he used the excuse of a pact between France and the Soviet Union to march into the demilitarized Rhineland—a decision that he took against the advice of many generals. Meanwhile the alliance with Italy, foreseen in *Mein Kampf*, rapidly became a reality as a result of the sanctions imposed by Britain and France against Italy during the Ethiopian war. In October 1936, a Rome–Berlin axis was proclaimed by Italian dictator Benito Mussolini; shortly afterward came the Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan; and a year later all three countries joined in a pact. Although on paper France had a number of allies



Röhm, Ernst

Ernst Röhm (right) with SS leaders Kurt Daluge (left) and Heinrich Himmler (centre), August 1933.

German Federal Archives (Bundesarchiv), Bild 102-14886; photograph, o.Ang.

Wehrmacht soldiers of the Third Reich

German soldiers swearing an oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler at the Rathenower Strasse barracks in Berlin, August 2, 1934.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini

Adolf Hitler (right) with Benito Mussolini.

Photos.com/Thinkstock

Adolf Hitler

Adolf Hitler reviewing German troops in Vienna, 1938.

AP Images

Munich Agreement

German Chancellor Adolf Hitler (left) and British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain (third from left) in Munich, Germany, shortly before the signing of the Munich Agreement, 1938.

Photos.com/Jupiterimages

Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, and Neville Chamberlain

(From left) Italian leader Benito Mussolini, German Chancellor Adolf

in Europe, while Germany had none, Hitler's Third Reich had become the principal European power.

In November 1937, at a secret meeting of his military leaders, Hitler outlined his plans for future conquest (beginning with Austria and Czechoslovakia). In January 1938 he dispensed with the services of those who were not wholehearted in their acceptance of Nazi dynamism—Hjalmar Schacht, who was concerned with the German economy; Werner von Fritsch, a representative of the caution of professional soldiers; and Konstantin von Neurath, Hindenburg's appointment at the foreign office. In February Hitler invited the Austrian chancellor, Kurt von Schuschnigg, to Berchtesgaden and forced him to sign an agreement including Austrian Nazis within the Vienna government. When Schuschnigg attempted to resist, announcing a plebiscite about Austrian independence, Hitler immediately ordered the invasion of Austria by German troops. The enthusiastic reception that Hitler received convinced him to settle the future of Austria by outright annexation (*Anschluss*). He returned in triumph to Vienna, the scene of his youthful humiliations and hardships. No resistance was encountered from Britain and France. Hitler had taken special care to secure the support of Italy; as this was forthcoming he proclaimed his undying gratitude to Mussolini.

In spite of his assurances that *Anschluss* would not affect Germany's relations with Czechoslovakia, Hitler proceeded at once with his plans against that country. Konrad Henlein, leader of the German minority in Czechoslovakia, was instructed to agitate for impossible demands on the part of the Sudetenland Germans, thereby enabling Hitler to move ahead on the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. Britain's and France's willingness to accept the cession of the Sudetenland areas to Germany presented Hitler with the choice between substantial gains by peaceful agreement or by a spectacular war against Czechoslovakia. The intervention by Mussolini and British prime minister Neville Chamberlain appear to have been decisive. Hitler accepted the Munich Agreement on September 30. He also declared that these were his last territorial demands in Europe.

Only a few months later, he proceeded to occupy the rest of Czechoslovakia. On March 15, 1939, he marched into Prague

Hitler, a German interpreter, and British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain meeting in Munich, Germany, September 29, 1938.

German Federal Archives (Bundesarchiv), Bild 146-1970-052-24

declaring that the rest of “Czechia” would become a German protectorate. A few days later (March 23) the Lithuanian government was forced to cede Memel (Klaipeda), next to the northern frontier of East Prussia, to Germany.

Immediately Hitler turned on Poland. Confronted by the Polish nation and its leaders, whose resolution to resist him was strengthened by a guarantee from Britain and France, Hitler confirmed his alliance with Italy (the “Pact of Steel,” May 1939). Moreover, on August 23, just within the deadline set for an attack on Poland, he signed a nonaggression pact with Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union—the greatest diplomatic bombshell in centuries. Hitler still disclaimed any quarrel with Britain, but to no avail; the German invasion of Poland (September 1) was followed two days later by a British and French declaration of war on Germany.

Adolf Hitler in *Punch*

Hitler, the Butcher of Europe, cartoon for *Punch* by E. H. Shepard.

Artmedia/Heritage-Images

In his foreign policy, Hitler combined opportunism and clever timing. He showed astonishing skill in judging the mood of the democratic leaders and exploiting their weaknesses—in spite of the fact that he had scarcely set foot outside Austria and Germany and spoke no foreign language. Up to this point every move had

been successful. Even his anxiety over British and French entry into the war was dispelled by the rapid success of the campaign in Poland. He could, he thought, rely on his talents during the war as he relied on them before.

World War II

Germany’s war strategy was assumed by Hitler from the first. When the successful campaign against Poland failed to produce the desired peace accord with Britain, he ordered the army to prepare for an immediate offensive in the west. Bad weather made some of his reluctant generals postpone the western offensive. This in turn led to two major changes in planning. The first was Hitler’s order to forestall an eventual British presence in Norway by occupying that country and Denmark in April 1940. Hitler took a close personal interest in this daring operation. From this time onward his intervention in the detail of military operations grew steadily greater. The second was Hitler’s important adoption of General Erich von Manstein’s plan for an attack through the Ardennes (which began May 10) instead of farther north. This was a brilliant and startling success. The German armies reached the Channel ports (which they had been unable to reach during World War I) in 10 days. Holland surrendered after 4 days and Belgium after 16 days. Hitler held back General Gerd von Rundstedt’s tanks south of Dunkirk, thus enabling the British to evacuate most of their army, but the western campaign as a whole was amazingly successful. On June 10 Italy entered the war on the side of Germany. On June 22 Hitler signed a triumphant armistice with the French on the site of the Armistice of 1918.

Hitler, Adolf

Hitler hoped that the British would negotiate an armistice. When this did not happen, he proceeded to plan the invasion of Britain,

Adolf Hitler (centre) posing in front of the Eiffel Tower in Paris shortly after signing an armistice with France, June 1940.

National Archives, Washington, D.C.

together with the elimination of British air power. At the same time preparations were begun for the invasion of the Soviet Union, which in Hitler's view was Britain's last hope for a bulwark against German control of the continent. Then Mussolini invaded Greece,

where the failures of the Italian armies made it necessary for German forces to come to their aid in the Balkans and North Africa. Hitler's plans were further disrupted by a coup d'état in Yugoslavia in March 1941, overthrowing the government that had made an agreement with Germany. Hitler immediately ordered his armies to subdue Yugoslavia. The campaigns in the Mediterranean theatre, although successful, were limited, compared to the invasion of Russia. Hitler would spare few forces from Operation Barbarossa, the planned invasion of the Soviet Union.

Third Reich; Hitler, Adolf; Mussolini, Benito

Italian dictator Benito Mussolini (left) touring the Eastern Front with German dictator Adolf Hitler (second from right) during World War II. Walking with them are the German Nazi leaders Hermann Göring (between Mussolini and Hitler) and Wilhelm Keitel (right).

AP/REX/Shutterstock.com

The attack against the U.S.S.R. was launched on June 22, 1941. The German army advanced swiftly into the Soviet Union, corralling almost three million Russian prisoners, but it failed to destroy its Russian opponent. Hitler became overbearing in his relations with his generals. He disagreed with them about the object of the main attack, and he wasted time and strength by failing to concentrate on a single objective. In December 1941, a few miles before Moscow, a Russian counteroffensive finally made it clear that Hitler's hopes of a single campaign could not be realized.

Himmler, Heinrich; Hitler, Adolf

Heinrich Himmler (left) and Adolf Hitler reviewing an assembly of Hitler's personal guard.

Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy

On December 7, the next day, the Japanese attacked U.S. forces at Pearl Harbor. Hitler's alliance with Japan forced him to declare war on the United States. From this moment on his entire strategy changed. He hoped and tried (like his idol Frederick II the Great) to break what he deemed was the unnatural coalition of his opponents by forcing one or the other of them to make peace. (In

the end, the "unnatural" coalition between Stalin and Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt did break up, but too late for Hitler.) He also ordered the reorganization of the German economy on a full wartime basis.

Meanwhile, Himmler prepared the ground for a "new order" in Europe. From 1933 to 1939 and in some instances even during the first years of the war, Hitler's purpose was to expel the Jews from the Greater German Reich. In 1941 this policy changed from expulsion to extermination. The concentration camps created under the Nazi regime were thereby expanded to include extermination camps, such as Auschwitz, and mobile extermination squads, the *Einsatzgruppen*. Although Catholics, Poles, homosexuals, Roma (Gypsies), and the handicapped were targeted for persecution, if not outright extermination, the Jews of Germany, Poland, and the Soviet Union were by far the most numerous among the victims; in German-occupied Europe some six million Jews were killed during the war. The sufferings of other peoples were only less when measured in their numbers killed.

At the end of 1942, defeat at El-Alamein and at Stalingrad and the American landing in French North Africa brought the turning point in the war, and Hitler's character and way of life began to change. Directing operations from his headquarters in the east, he refused to visit bombed cities or to allow some withdrawals, and he became increasingly dependent on his physician, Theodor Morell, and on the large amounts and varieties of medicines he ingested. Yet Hitler had not lost the power to react vigorously in the face of misfortune. After the arrest of Mussolini in July 1943 and the Italian armistice, he not only directed the occupation of all important positions held by the Italian army but also ordered the rescue of Mussolini, with the intention that he should head a new fascist government. On the eastern front, however, there was less and less possibility of holding up the advance. Relations with his army commanders grew strained, the more so with the growing importance given to the SS (*Schutzstaffel*) divisions. Meanwhile, the general failure of the U-boat campaign and the bombing of Germany made chances of German victory very unlikely.

Desperate officers and anti-Nazi civilians became ready to remove Hitler and negotiate a peace. Several attempts on Hitler's life were planned in 1943–44; the most nearly successful was made on July 20, 1944, when Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg exploded a bomb at a conference being held at Hitler's headquarters in East Prussia. But Hitler escaped with superficial injuries, and, with few exceptions, those implicated in the plot were executed. The reduction of the army's independence was now made complete; National Socialist political officers were appointed to all military headquarters.

Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini after the July Plot failed

Adolf Hitler (right) and Benito Mussolini (left) at the damaged Wolfsschanze (Wolf's Lair) field headquarters in Rastenburg, East Prussia, after an assassination attempt on Hitler, July 1944.

Pictorial Press Ltd./Alamy

Thereafter, Hitler was increasingly ill; but he did not relax or lose control, and he continued to exercise an almost hypnotic power over his close subordinates, none of whom wielded any independent authority. The Allied invasion of Normandy (June 6, 1944) marked the beginning of the end. Within a few months, eight European capitals (Rome, Paris, Brussels, Bucharest, Sofia, Athens, Belgrade, Helsinki) were liberated by the Allies or surrendered to them. In December 1944 Hitler moved his headquarters to the west to direct an offensive in the Ardennes aimed at splitting the

American and the British armies. When this failed, his hopes for victory became ever more visionary, based on the use of new weapons (German rockets had been fired on London since June 1944) or on the breakup of the Allied Powers.

After January 1945 Hitler never left the Chancellery in Berlin or its bunker, abandoning a plan to lead a final resistance in the south as the Soviet forces closed in on Berlin. In a state of extreme nervous exhaustion, he at last accepted the inevitability of defeat and thereupon prepared to take his own life, leaving to its fate the country over which he had taken absolute command. Before this, two further acts remained. At midnight on April 28–29 he married Eva Braun. Immediately afterward he dictated his political testament, justifying his career and appointing Admiral Karl Dönitz as head of the state and Joseph Goebbels as chancellor.

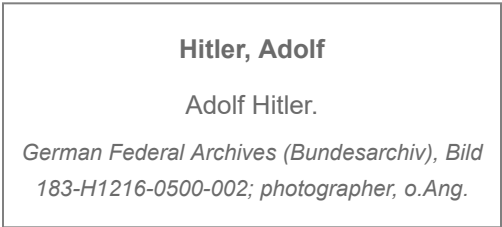
On April 30 he said farewell to Goebbels and the few others remaining, then retired to his suite and shot himself. His wife took poison. In accordance with his instructions, their bodies were burned.

Hitler’s success was due to the susceptibility of postwar Germany to his unique talents as a national leader. His rise to power was not inevitable; yet there was no one who equalled his ability to exploit and shape events to his own ends. The power that he wielded was unprecedented, both in its scope and in the technical resources at its command. His ideas and purposes were accepted in whole or in part by millions of people, especially in Germany but also elsewhere. By the time he was defeated, he had destroyed most of what was left of old Europe, while the German people had to face what they would later call “Year Zero,” 1945.

Alan Bullock, Baron BullockWilfrid F. KnappThe Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica

Hitler’s place in history

At the turn of the 21st century more books had been written about Hitler since his death than about Napoleon during the half-century after the latter’s demise. Time and distance from the events of World War II have also affected the historical interpretation of Hitler.



There is a general consensus about his historical *importance* (a term that does not imply a positive judgment). Hitler was principally, and alone, responsible for starting World War II. (This was different from the various responsibilities of rulers and of statesmen who had unleashed World War I). His guilt for the implementation of the Holocaust—that is, the shift of German policy from the expulsion to the extermination of Jews, including eventually Jews of all of Europe and of European Russia, is also obvious. Although there exists no single document of his order to that effect, Hitler’s speeches, writings, reports of discussions with associates and foreign statesmen, and testimony by those who carried out the actions have often been cited as evidence of his role. Many of his most violent statements were recorded by his minions during his “Table Talks” (including the not entirely authentic “Bormann remarks” of February–April 1945). For example, on January 30, 1939, to celebrate the sixth anniversary of his rule, Hitler told the Reichstag: “Today I will once more be a prophet: If the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more in a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevization of the Earth and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe.”

In his final will and testament, written just before his suicide in April 1945, he charged the Germans to continue the struggle against the Jews: “Above all, I enjoin the government and the people to uphold the race laws to the limit and to resist mercilessly the poisoner of all nations, international Jewry.”

Despite the immense mass of surviving German documents (and the large volume of his recorded speeches and other statements) Hitler was, as he himself said on a few occasions, a secretive man; and

some of his views and decisions differed at times from his public expressions.

For a long time historians and other commentators took it for granted that Hitler's wishes and ambitions and ideology were clearly (and frighteningly) set forth in *Mein Kampf*. In the first, autobiographical, portion of *Mein Kampf*, however, he twisted the truth in at least three matters: his relationship to his father (which was very different from the filial affection he had set forth in *Mein Kampf*); the conditions of his life in Vienna (which were less marked by abject poverty than he had stated); and the crystallization of his worldview, including his anti-Semitism, during his Vienna years (the evidence now suggests that this crystallization occurred much later, in Munich).

Hitler, Adolf: *Mein Kampf*

A copy of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* on exhibit at the Stutthof concentration camp, near Sztutowo, Poland.

PATSTOCK/AGE fotostock

The popular view of Hitler often involves assumptions about his mental health. There has been a tendency to attribute madness to Hitler. Despite the occasional evidences of his furious outbursts, Hitler's cruelties and his most extreme expressions and orders suggest a cold brutality that was fully conscious. The attribution of madness to Hitler would of course absolve him from his

responsibility for his deeds and words (as it also absolves the responsibility of those who are unwilling to think further about him). Extensive researches of his medical records also indicate that, at least until the last 10 months of his life, he was not profoundly handicapped by illness (except for advancing symptoms of Parkinson disease). What is indisputable is that Hitler had a certain tendency to hypochondria; that he ingested vast amounts of medications during the war; and that as early as 1938 he convinced himself that he would not live long—which may have been a reason for speeding up his timetable for conquest at that time. It should also be noted that Hitler possessed mental abilities that were denied by some of his earlier critics: these included an astonishing memory for certain details and an instinctive insight into his opponents' weaknesses. Again, these talents increase, rather than diminish, his responsibility for the many brutal and evil actions he ordered and committed.

His most amazing achievement was his uniting the great mass of the German (and Austrian) people behind him. Throughout his career his popularity was larger and deeper than the popularity of the National Socialist Party. A great majority of Germans believed in him until the very end. In this respect he stands out among almost all of the dictators of the 19th and 20th centuries, which is especially impressive when we consider that the Germans were among the best-educated peoples in the 20th century. There is no question that the overwhelming majority of the German people supported Hitler, though often only passively. Their trust in him was greater than their trust in the Nazi hierarchy. Of course, what contributed to this support were the economic and social successes, for which he fully took credit, during his early leadership: the virtual disappearance of unemployment, the rising prosperity of the masses, the new social institutions, and the increase of German prestige in the 1930s—achievements unparalleled in the histories of other modern totalitarian dictatorships. In spite of the spiritual and intellectual progenitors of some of his ideas there is no German national leader to whom he may be compared. In sum, he had no forerunners—another difference between him and other dictators.

By 1938 Hitler had made Germany the most powerful and feared country in Europe (and perhaps in the world). He achieved all of this without war (and there are now some historians who state that had he died in 1938 before the mass executions began, he would have gone down in history as the greatest statesman in the history of the German people). In fact, he came very close to winning the war in 1940; but the resistance of Britain (personified by Winston Churchill) thwarted him. Nevertheless, it took the overwhelming, and in many ways unusual, Anglo-American coalition with the Soviet Union to defeat the Third Reich; and there are reasons to believe that neither side would have been able to conquer him alone. At the same time it was his brutality and some of his decisions that led to his destruction, binding the unusual alliance of capitalists and communists, of Churchill and Roosevelt and Stalin together. Hitler thought he was a great statesman, but he did not realize the unconditional contemptibility of what he had unleashed; he thought that the coalition of his enemies would eventually break up, and then he would be able to settle with one side or the other. In thinking thus he deceived himself, though such wishes and hopes were also current among many Germans until the end.

Open and hidden admirers of Hitler continue to exist (and not only in Germany): some of them because of a malign attraction to the efficacy of evil; others because of their admiration of Hitler's achievements, no matter how transitory or brutal. However, because of the brutalities and the very crimes associated with his name, it is not likely that Hitler's reputation as the incarnation of evil will ever change.

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