Hitler and the Rise of the Nazi Party

Early Life
Dictator Adolf Hitler was born in Brăunau am Inn, Austria, on April 20, 1889, and was the fourth of six children born to Alois Hitler and Klara Polzl. When Hitler was 3 years old, the family moved from Austria to Germany. As a child, Hitler clashed frequently with his father. Following the death of his younger brother, Edmund, in 1900, he became detached and introverted. His father did not approve of his interest in fine art rather than business. In addition to art, Hitler showed an early interest in German nationalism, rejecting the authority of Austria-Hungary. This nationalism would become the motivating force of Hitler's life.

Alois died suddenly in 1903. Two years later, Adolf's mother allowed her son to drop out of school. He moved to Vienna and worked as a casual laborer and a watercolor painter. Hitler applied to the Academy of Fine Arts twice, and was rejected both times. Out of money, he moved into a homeless shelter, where he remained for several years. Hitler later pointed to these years as the time when he first cultivated his anti-Semitism, though there is some debate about this account.

World War I
At the outbreak of World War I, Hitler applied to serve in the German army. He was accepted in August 1914, though he was still an Austrian citizen. Although he spent much of his time away from the front lines, Hitler was present at a number of significant battles and was wounded at the Somme. He was decorated for bravery, receiving the Iron Cross First Class and the Black Wound Badge.

When Germany surrendered in November 1918, he was in a military hospital recovering from temporary blindness that resulted from his exposure in battle to mustard gas. He was deeply shaken by the news of the armistice. Like other German nationalists, he believed that the German army had been betrayed by civilian leaders and Marxists. He found the Treaty of Versailles degrading, particularly the demilitarization of the Rhineland and the stipulation that Germany accept responsibility for starting the war.

Becoming a Leader
After World War I, Hitler returned to Munich and continued to work for the military as an intelligence officer. While monitoring the activities of the German Workers’ Party (DAP), Hitler adopted many of the anti-Semitic, nationalist and anti-Marxist ideas of DAP founder Anton Drexler. Drexler invited Hitler to join the DAP, which he did in 1919. To increase its appeal, the DAP changed its name to the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP). Hitler personally designed the party banner, featuring a swastika in a white circle on a red background. Hitler soon gained notoriety for his vitriolic speeches against the Treaty of Versailles, rival politicians, Marxists and Jews. In 1921, Hitler replaced Drexler as NSDAP party chairman.

Hitler's vitriolic beer-hall speeches began attracting regular audiences. Early followers included army captain Ernst Röhm, the head of the Nazi paramilitary organization, the Sturmabteilung (SA), which protected meetings and frequently attacked political opponents. By November 1921 Hitler was recognized as Fuhrer of a movement which had 3,000 members, and boosted his personal power by organizing strong-arm squads to keep order at his meetings and break up those of his opponents. Out of these squads grew the storm troopers (SA) organized by Captain Ernst Röhm and Hitler's black-shirted personal bodyguard, the Schutzstaffel (SS).

Hitler focused his propaganda against the Versailles Treaty, the "November criminals," the Marxists and the visible, internal enemy No. 1, the "Jew," who was responsible for all Germany's domestic problems. In the twenty-five-point programme of the NSDAP announced on 24 February 1920, the exclusion of the Jews from the Volk community, the idea of Aryan race supremacy and extreme nationalism were combined with "socialistic" ideas of profit-sharing and nationalization inspired by ideologues like Gottfried Feder.
The Beer Hall Putsch

By November 1923 Hitler was convinced that the Weimar Republic was on the verge of collapse and, together with General Ludendorff and local nationalist groups, sought to overthrow the government in Munich. Bursting into a beer-hall in Munich and firing his pistol into the ceiling, he shouted out that he was heading a new provisional government which would carry through a revolution against "Red Berlin." Hitler and Ludendorff then marched through Munich at the head of 3,000 men, only to be met by police fire which left sixteen dead and brought the attempted putsch to an ignominious end. Hitler was arrested and tried for treason on 26 February 1924. Though sentenced to five years' imprisonment, Hitler served only nine months during which he wrote Mein Kampf.

In the book, he stated his beliefs and his ideas for Germany's future, including his plan to conquer much of Europe. Territories lost in World War I would be recovered. Austria and parts of Czechoslovakia where Germans lived would be added to Germany. The growing German nation would seize lebensraum (living space) from Poland, the Soviet Union, and other countries to the east. Hitler also wrote that Germans represented a superior form of humanity. They must stay "pure," he said, by avoiding marriage to Jews and Slavs. Hitler blamed the Jews for the evils of the world. He accused them of corrupting everything of ethical and national value. Democracy, said Hitler, could lead only to Communism. A dictatorship was the only way to save Germany from the threats of Communism and Jewish treason.

The failure of the Beer-Hall putsch and his period of imprisonment transformed Hitler from a novice leader into a shrewd political tactician, who henceforth decided that he would never again confront the gun barrels of army and police until they were under his command. He concluded that the road to power lay not through force alone but through means established by the Weimar Constitution.

Rise of the Nazi Party

When Hitler left prison in December 1924, great changes had taken place in Germany. A schedule for Germany's reparations payments helped stabilize the German currency, and the nation showed signs of recovering from the war. Most people had work, homes, food, and hope for the future. The government had outlawed the Nazis after the Beer Hall Putsch and many party members had drifted into other political groups.

After Hitler was released, he began to rebuild his party. He gradually convinced the government that the party would act legally, and the government lifted its ban on the Nazis. Hitler won friends in small towns, in labor unions, and among farmers and a few business people and industrialists. He also set up an elite party guard, the Schutzstaffel, known as the SS. By 1929, though the Nazis had not yet gained substantial voter support, their organization and discipline had made them an important minority party.

In 1930, the worldwide Great Depression hit Germany. Workers again faced unemployment and hunger. That same year, Germany agreed to the Young Plan of 1929 to reschedule reparations payments. In 1929, Hitler had launched a nationwide campaign to defeat the plan. This campaign helped him become a major political force throughout the country. He led protest marches, organized mass meetings, and delivered speeches all over Germany. Hitler used his old arguments in the campaign against the Young Plan and in a national election campaign that took place in 1930. But he toned down his violent speeches against Jews, which had failed to attract many votes. Hitler promised to rid Germany of Communists and other "enemies" and to reunite Germany and all the other parts of Europe in which German was spoken.

In 1932, five major elections were held in Germany as its leaders struggled to give the nation political stability. In the July elections for the Reichstag (parliament), the Nazis became Germany's strongest party, receiving nearly 38 per cent of the vote. Leaders of the other parties offered Hitler Cabinet posts in exchange for Nazi support. But as leader of the strongest party, he refused to accept any arrangement that did not make him chancellor (prime minister) of Germany.
The majority of the German people and the leading politicians did not want Hitler to become chancellor. They understood that he would make himself dictator and set up a reign of terror. Germany’s president, Paul von Hindenburg, also had serious misgivings about Hitler. But the 85-year-old Hindenburg, persuaded by his friends and his son Oskar, accepted Hitler's promise to act lawfully if he were named to form a government. On Jan. 30, 1933, Hindenburg named Hitler chancellor.

**Hitler Establishes a Dictatorship**

There were only two Nazis in the Cabinet besides Hitler—Goring and Wilhelm Frick. The rest of the 11-member Cabinet was made up of politicians who were more moderate than the Nazis. The vice chancellor, Franz von Papen, and his political allies thought this arrangement would limit Hitler's power. But Hitler had never settled for anything less than full control. He moved steadily toward dictatorship. There was no place for freedom under his government, which Hitler called the *Third Reich*.

On Feb. 27, 1933, a fire began that destroyed the Reichstag building. Many historians believe that it was planned by the Nazis. A pro-Communist Dutch anarchist was found at the site of the fire and admitted that he had set it. The Nazis quickly blamed the Communists. Hindenburg signed another emergency decree that gave the government almost unlimited powers.

Elections for a new Reichstag were held on March 5, 1933. Hitler hoped to win more than 50 per cent of the vote for the Nazi Party. But the party received only 43.9 per cent despite using terror to influence voters. After the election, the Communist deputies were arrested or not admitted to the Reichstag. This gave the Nazis a majority of the seats. On March 23, 1933, the Nazi-dominated Reichstag passed a law "for the removal of distress from the people and the state." This law, known as the Enabling Act, gave the government full dictatorial powers and, in effect, suspended basic civil and human rights for four years. When the president had signed it, Hitler had a firm "legal" basis on which to govern as he pleased. He had also destroyed the constitution through outwardly legal means.

By mid-July 1933, the government had outlawed freedom of the press, all labor unions, and all political parties except the Nazis. The *Gestapo* (secret state police) hunted down the enemies and opponents of the government. People were jailed or shot on suspicion alone. By the time Hindenburg died in August 1934, Hitler ruled Germany completely. He assumed the title *Fuhrer und Reichskanzler* (leader and reich chancellor).

