The incandescent bon vivant of the Third Reich, Hermann Wilhelm Goering oversaw vast areas of the Nazi economy, commanded the Luftwaffe, and was second only to Hitler. He was also the highest ranking Nazi defendant at Nuremberg, where he escaped the hangman’s noose only through suicide.

Hermann was born to Heinrich Ernst and Franziska (née Tiefenbrunn) Goering, and baptized a Protestant in Rosenheim. His father was an imperial commissioner in Africa, and his godfather the aristocrat Hermann Ritter von Epstein. Growing up in Epstein’s castles, Goering’s childhood was idyllic, although he was a poor student who skipped lessons and ran away from his boarding school in Ansbach. He responded well, however, to officer training in Berlin, and by 1911 was a lieutenant searching for a military path to glory. He found it in the air during World War I, where he gained not only the Pour Le Merite, but also command of the famous Richthofen Squadron after the Red Baron’s death.

Finding no employment in post-war Germany, Goering moved to Sweden where he worked as a stunt and transport pilot. There he met Carin von Kantzow, whom he married and brought to Germany. In 1922 Goering met Hitler and joined the National Socialist German Worker’s Party (NSDAP) (Nazi Party). Pleased to have a war hero in the party, Hitler made Goering chief of the SA (Sturmabteilung—storm troopers). The following year, Goering was severely wounded in the Munich Beer Hall Putsch. He fled to Austria and then to Sweden to recover, developing the morphine addiction that would stay with him for the rest of his life.

Returning to Germany in 1927, Goering was welcomed by Hitler as his ambassador to the upper class. Within a few years he had gained the presidency of the Reichstag and smoothed the way for Hitler’s appointment as chancellor in 1933. Hitler rewarded him with several offices, the most important of which was minister of the interior for Prussia—giving Goering control of Germany’s most powerful police force, from which he created the Geheime Staatspolizei (Gestapo—the Secret State Police). The Reichstag fire gave Goering the excuse to wield his new powers, to the detriment of opposition parties and other “undesirables.”

At Hitler’s order, Goering surrendered control of the Gestapo and the rapidly expanding concentration camp system to Reichsfuehrer SS Heinrich Himmler. As a consolation, Hitler made Goering Reich master of forests and hunting, and Goering commenced construction on Carinhall, his hunting lodge north of Berlin where in 1935 he held the wedding reception for his second marriage to Emmy Sonnemann (Carin had died in 1931). Goering was at his eccentric best at Carinhall, where he often changed elaborate costumes five times daily, and where he later kept most of the art treasures he plundered from the museums of Europe.

Having successfully plotted with Himmler and his deputy Reinhard Heydrich to murder Ernst Roehm, the leader of the SA and others in the 1934 “Night of the Long Knives,” Goering had enough stock with Hitler to have himself named the Führer’s successor. He continued to accrue offices, grew quite fat, disported himself at Carinhall, and turned his attention to the Luftwaffe, of which he had been named chief. Using his positions as Plenipotentiary for the Four Year Plan and head of the Office of Raw Materials and Foreign Exchange, he rapidly expanded the Luftwaffe in both men and material, and sent...
them on a successful trial run in the 1936–1939 Spanish Civil War. Ever ambitious, Goering hoped to be appointed minister of war, but Hitler made himself supreme commander of the armed forces, and consoled Goering with a field marshal’s baton after the battle of France in 1940.

In 1938 Goering successfully engineered the Anschluss with Austria, but demurred at further conquests. Out of favor with Hitler for his conservatism in empire building, Goering was eclipsed by the foreign minister, von Ribbentrop. Although the Luftwaffe performed well in the opening battles of World War II, its failure in the Battle of Britain, and later in resupplying the surrounded 6th Army at Stalingrad, ensured Goering was banished from Hitler’s inner circle. Still, Hitler felt some loyalty to his “old fighter,” named him Germany’s only Reichsmarschall, and confirmed him as his successor.

As the war progressed, the well-titled Goering retreated increasingly into fantasy. His uniforms became more elaborate, his decorations more diamond-encrusted, and his morphine addiction more pronounced. His reaction to the failure of the Luftwaffe to protect Germany from devastating Allied bombing was to spend more time acquiring art for his rapidly growing collection at Carinhall.

As the war drew to a close, Goering attempted to assume Hitler’s powers. On hearing this news, Hitler had him stripped of all his offices, ordered him arrested, and appointed Admiral Karl Dönitz as his successor. After Hitler’s suicide, Goering offered his services to Dönitz, who refused them. On May 7, 1945, Goering was arrested by American soldiers.

As the highest ranking Nazi in captivity, Goering had considerable cachet at the Nuremberg Trials, which he used to mount a spirited, unrepentant defense and to cajole and bully his fellow defendants. His defense, however, could not stand against the weight of the concentration camps and his order to Heydrich to execute the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question.” He was convicted on all four counts of the Nuremberg indictment and sentenced to death by hanging. A few hours before the sentence was to be carried out, he killed himself with a cyanide capsule. He was survived by his wife Emmy and their daughter Edda.

SEE ALSO: Crimes against humanity; Einsatzgruppen; Genocide; Heydrich, Reinhard (1904–1942); Himmler, Heinrich (1900–1945); War crimes; World War II: Eastern Front.

Further Reading


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