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Summary Article: **Hitler, Adolf**
from *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*

known as

Der Führer ("The Leader")

1889-1945

German dictator

Hitler was born in Braunau in Upper Austria, the son of a minor customs official. He was educated at the secondary schools of Linz and Steyr, and destined by his father for the civil service. Hitler, however, saw himself as a great artist and, perhaps deliberately, failed his school leaving examinations. After his father's death he attended a private art school in Munich, but failed to pass into the Vienna Academy. He lived on his wits in Vienna (1904-13), making a precarious living by selling bad postcard sketches, beating carpets and doing odd jobs. He worked only fitfully and spent his time in passionate political arguments directed at the money-lending Jews and the trade unions. He dodged military service, and in 1913 emigrated to Munich, where he found work as a draughtsman.

In 1914 he volunteered for war service in a Bavarian regiment, where he rose to the rank of corporal, and was recommended for the award of the Iron Cross for service as a runner on the western front. At the time of the German surrender in 1918 he was lying wounded, and temporarily blinded by gas, in hospital. In 1919, while acting as an informer for the army, he had to spy on the activities of small political parties; he became a member of one of them, and changed its name to *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (National Socialist German Workers' Party) in 1920. Its programme was a convenient mixture of mild radicalism, bitter hatred of the politicians who had "dishonoured Germany" by signing the Versailles *Diktat*, and clever exploitation of provincial grievances against the weak federal government.

By 1923 Hitler was strong enough to attempt, with the support of General Ludendorff's and other extreme right-wing factions, the overthrow of the Bavarian government. On 9 November, the Nazis marched through the streets of Munich, Mussolini-style; but the police, despite a tacit agreement, machine-gunned the Nazi column. Hitler narrowly escaped serious injury, Hermann Goering was badly wounded, and 16 storm troopers were killed. Hitler spent nine months in Landsberg prison, during which time he dictated his autobiography and political testament, *Mein Kampf* (1925, "My Struggle", Eng trans 1939), to Rudolf Hess. He began, with Joseph Goebbels, to woo the Ruhr industrialists, Gustav Krupp and others, and although unsuccessful in the presidential elections of 1932 when he stood against Paul von Hindenburg, Hitler was made Chancellor in January 1933 on the advice of Franz von Papen, who thought that he could best be brought to heel inside the Cabinet.

Hitler, however, soon dispensed with constitutional restraints. He silenced all opposition, and, by plotting the burning of the *Reichstag* building (February 1933), and advertising it as a communist plot, succeeded in forcing a general election, in which the police, under Goering, allowed the Nazis full play to

break up the meetings of their opponents. By these means the Nazi Party achieved a bare majority, and Hitler assumed absolute power through the Enabling Acts. He ruthlessly crushed opposition inside his own party by the purge of June 1934 (the Night of the Long Knives) in which his rival Ernst Röhm and hundreds of influential Nazis were murdered at the hands of Hitler's bodyguard, the SS, under Heinrich Himmler and Reinhard Heydrich. Hindenburg conveniently died in August, leaving Hitler sole master of Germany.

Under the pretext of undoing the wrongs of the Treaty of Versailles, and of uniting the German peoples and extending their living-space (*Lebensraum*), he openly rearmed (1935), sent troops into the demilitarized Rhineland zone, established the Rome-Berlin "axis" (October 1936) with Mussolini's Italy, created "Greater Germany" by the invasion of Austria (1938), and, by systematic infiltration and engineered incidents, engendered a favourable situation for an easy absorption of the Sudeten or German-populated border lands of Czechoslovakia, to which Great Britain and France acquiesced at Munich (September 1938). Renouncing further territorial claims, Hitler nevertheless seized Bohemia and Moravia, took Memel from Lithuania and demanded from Poland the return of Danzig and free access to East Prussia through the "Corridor". Poland's refusal, backed by Britain and France, precipitated World War II, on 3 September 1939.

Meanwhile Hitler's domestic policy was one of thorough Nazification of all aspects of German life, enforced by the Secret State Police (*Gestapo*), and the establishment of concentration camps for political opponents and Jews, who were systematically persecuted. Strategic roads or *Autobahnen* were built, Hjalmar Schacht's economic policy expanded German exports up to 1936, and then Goering's "Guns before Butter" four-year plan boosted armaments and the construction of the Siegfried Line. Hitler entered the war with the grave misgivings of the German High Command, but as his "intuitions" scored massive triumphs in the first two years, he more and more ignored the advice of military experts.

Peace with Russia was secured by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact (August 1939). Hitler invaded Poland, and after three weeks' *Blitzkrieg* ("lightning war") divided it between Russia and Germany. In 1940 Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium and France were occupied and the British repelled from Dunkirk; but Goering's invincible *Luftwaffe* was heavily defeated in the Battle of Britain (August-September 1940). Hitler then turned to the east; he entered Romania (October 1940), invaded Yugoslavia and Greece (April 1941), and, ignoring his pact of convenience with Stalin, attacked Russia. As an ally of Japan, he was soon also at war with the USA (December 1941).

The *Wehrmacht* penetrated to the gates of Moscow and Leningrad, to the Volga, into the Caucasus and, with Italy as an ally from 1940, to North Africa as far as Alexandria. But there the tide turned. Montgomery's victory over Rommel at El Alamein (October 1942), and Friedrich Paulus's grave defeat, through Hitler's misdirection, at Stalingrad (November 1942), heralded the Nazi withdrawal from North Africa pursued by the British and Americans (November 1942-May 1943). There followed the Allied invasion of Sicily, Italian capitulation (September 1943) and overwhelming Russian victories (1943-44); then the Anglo-American invasion of Normandy and the breaching of Rommel's "Atlantic Wall" (June 1944). Using the newly developed V1 and V2 guided missiles, Hitler responded with attacks on southern England.

But these developments came too late, and the Allies made steady progress. Opposition to Hitler was growing, and several attempts were made on his life. In July 1944 Hitler miraculously survived the

explosion of a bomb placed at his feet by Colonel Stauffenberg; he purged the army of all suspects, including Rommel, who was given the choice of committing suicide. In December, Karl von Rundstedt's counter-offensive against the Allies in the Ardennes was a failure, and the invasion of Germany followed. Hitler lived out his fantasies, commanding non-existent armies from his Berlin bunker. With the Russians only a few hundred metres away, he went through a marriage ceremony with his mistress, Eva Braun, in the presence of the Goebbels family, who then poisoned themselves. The available evidence suggests that Hitler and his wife committed suicide and had their bodies cremated on 30 April 1945.

Hitler's much-vaunted Third Reich, which was to have endured for ever, ended ingloriously after twelve years of unparalleled barbarity, in which 30 million people lost their lives, 12 million of them far away from the battlefields, by mass shootings, in forced labour camps and in the gas ovens of Belsen, Dachau, Auschwitz, Ravensbrück and other concentration camps in accordance with Nazi racial theories and the "New Order", not forgetting the indiscriminate torture and murder of many prisoners of war, or the uprooting and extermination of entire village communities in Poland, France and Russia. Such horror prompted the international trial at Nuremberg (1945-46), at which 21 of the leading living Nazis were tried and eleven executed for war crimes.

Bullock, Alan, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (1992) and *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (1952, rev edn 1964); Broszat, Martin, *Hitler and the Collapse of Weimar Germany* (1987); Waite, Robert G L, *The Psychopathic God: Adolf Hitler* (1977); Trevor-Roper, Hugh, *The Last Days of Hitler* (1947).

Die breite Masse eines Volkes [fällt] einer grossen Lüge leichter zum Opfer ... als einer kleinen. "The broad mass of a nation ... will more easily fall victim to a big lie than to a small one."

- From *Mein Kampf*, ch.10 (1925).

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