



# 39 ADOLF HITLER

1889 - 1945

I must confess that it is with a feeling of disgust that I include Adolf Hitler in this book. His influence was almost entirely pernicious, and I have no desire to honor a man whose chief importance lies in his having caused the deaths of some thirty-five million people. However, there is no getting away from the fact that Hitler had an enormous influence upon the lives of a very great number of persons.

Adolf Hitler was born in 1889, in Braunau, Austria. As a young man, he was an unsuccessful artist, and sometime during his youth he became an ardent German nationalist. During

World War I, he served in the German army, was wounded, and received two medals for bravery.

Germany's defeat left him shocked and angered. In 1919, when he was thirty, he joined a tiny, right-wing party in Munich, which soon changed its name to the National Socialist German Workers' Party (the Nazi party, for short). Within two years he had become its undisputed leader (in German: Fuehrer).

Under Hitler's leadership, the Nazi party rapidly increased in strength, and in November 1923, it attempted a coup d'etat known as "the Munich Beer Hall Putsch." When the putsch failed, Hitler was arrested, tried for treason, and convicted. However, he was released from jail after serving less than one year of his sentence.

In 1928, the Nazi party was still small. However, the advent of the Great Depression caused a general public disaffection with the established German political parties. The Nazis rapidly gained strength, and in January 1933, at the age of forty-four, Hitler became chancellor of Germany.

Upon becoming chancellor, Hitler rapidly established a dictatorship by using the government apparatus to crush all opposition. It should not be thought that this process consisted of a gradual erosion of civil liberties and the rights of criminal defendants. It was accomplished very quickly, and the Nazis frequently did not bother with trials at all. Many political opponents were beaten up, or simply murdered outright. Still, in the pre-war years, Hitler gained the genuine support of most Germans, because he was able to reduce unemployment and generate economic recovery.

Hitler then set Germany on a path of conquest that was to produce World War II. He achieved his first territorial gains without actually going to war. England and France, beset with their own economic problems, so desperately desired peace that they did not intervene when Hitler violated the Treaty of Versailles by building up the German army, nor when his troops occupied and fortified the Rhineland (March 1936), nor when he forcibly annexed Austria (March 1938). They even acquiesced

(September 1938) to his annexation of the Sudetenland, the well-fortified border region of Czechoslovakia. An international agreement known as the Munich Pact, which the British and French hoped would buy “peace in our time,” left Czechoslovakia helpless, and Hitler took over the rest of that country a few months later. At each stage, Hitler cleverly combined arguments justifying his actions with the threat that he would go to war if his desires were thwarted, and at each stage, the Western democracies timidly backed down.

England and France, however, were determined to defend Poland, Hitler’s next target. Hitler first protected himself by signing, in August 1939, a “non-aggression” pact with Stalin (actually an offensive alliance, in which the two dictators agreed on how to divide Poland between them). Nine days later, Germany attacked Poland, and sixteen days after that, the Soviet Union did also. Though England and France declared war on Germany, Poland was quickly defeated.

Hitler’s greatest year was 1940. In April, his armies gobbled up Denmark and Norway. In May, they overran Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg. In June, France capitulated. But later that year, the British withstood a long series of attacks by the German air force—the celebrated “Battle of Britain”—and Hitler was never able to launch an invasion of England.

Hitler’s armies conquered Greece and Yugoslavia in April 1941. In June 1941, Hitler tore up his non-aggression pact with the Russians and attacked them, too. His armies conquerèd enormous stretches of Soviet territory, but were unable to eliminate the Russian armies before winter. Though already fighting both England and Russia, Hitler nevertheless declared war on the United States in December 1941, a few days after the Japanese had attacked the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor.

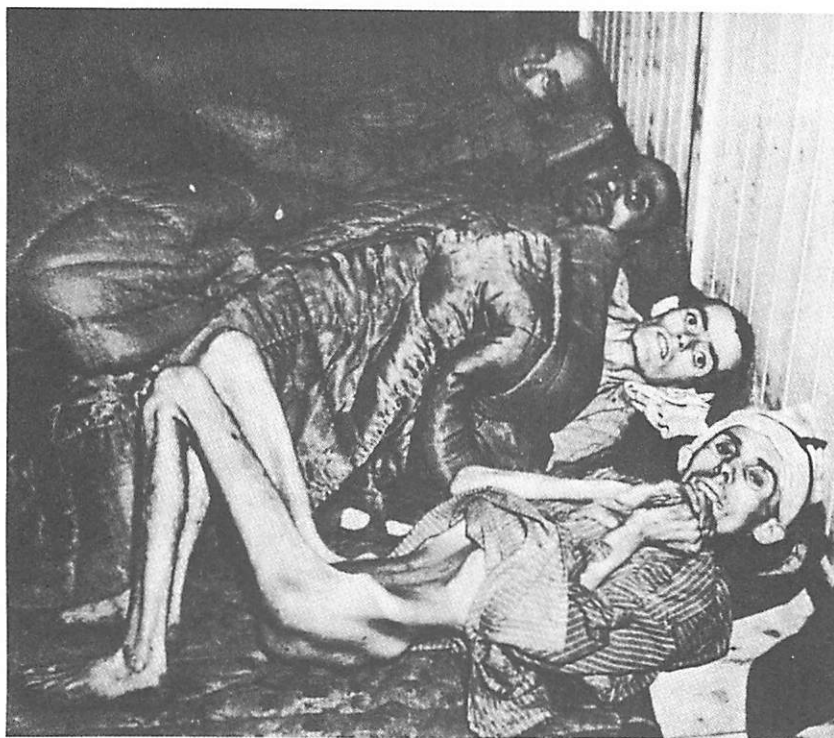
By the middle of 1942, Germany ruled a larger portion of Europe than had ever been controlled by any nation in history; in addition, she ruled much of North Africa. The turning point of the war came in the last half of 1942, when Germany lost the crucial battles of El Alamein in Egypt and Stalingrad in Russia.

After those setbacks, German military fortunes declined steadily. But although Germany's eventual defeat should now have seemed inevitable, Hitler refused to give up. Despite fearful casualties, Germany continued fighting for more than two years after Stalingrad. The bitter end came in the spring of 1945. Hitler committed suicide in Berlin on April 30; seven days later, Germany surrendered.

During his years in power, Hitler engaged in a policy of genocide without parallel in history. He was a fanatical racist, with a particularly virulent animosity toward the Jews. He made it his specific, publicly-stated goal to kill every Jew in the world. During his regime, the Nazis constructed large extermination camps, equipped with massive gas chambers for this purpose. In every territory that came under his control, innocent men, women, and children were rounded up and shipped off in cattle cars to be killed in those chambers. In the space of just a few years, almost 6,000,000 Jews died in this way.

The Jews were not Hitler's only victims. During his regime, staggering numbers of Russians and gypsies were also massacred, as well as many others who were deemed to be either racially inferior or enemies of the state. It should never be imagined that these murders were spontaneous acts, performed in the heat and passion of battle: Hitler's death camps were organized as carefully as a great business enterprise. Records were kept, quotas set, and the bodies of the dead systematically searched for such valuables as gold tooth fillings and wedding rings. The bodies of many of the victims were also utilized for the manufacture of soap. So intent upon this program of murder was Hitler, that even late in the war, when Germany was short of fuel for domestic and military use, the cattle cars were kept rolling to the death camps on their grisly—but militarily useless—mission.

For several reasons, it seems obvious that Hitler's fame will last. In the first place, he is widely considered to be the most evil man in all of history. If men like Nero and Caligula, whose misdeeds were small in comparison with Hitler's, have remained well-known for twenty centuries as symbols of cruelty, it seems



*Scene at Buchenwald.*

safe to predict that Hitler, whose reputation as the most evil person in history is uncontested, will remain famous for many, many centuries. In addition, of course, Hitler will be remembered as the principal instigator of World War II, the largest war the world has yet seen. The advent of nuclear weapons makes it very unlikely that there will be many such large-scale wars in the future. Therefore, even two or three thousand years from now, World War II will probably be considered a major event in history.

Furthermore, Hitler will remain famous because his entire story is so bizarre and so interesting. That a foreigner (Hitler was born in Austria, not Germany) without political experience, money, or political connections could, in a period of less than

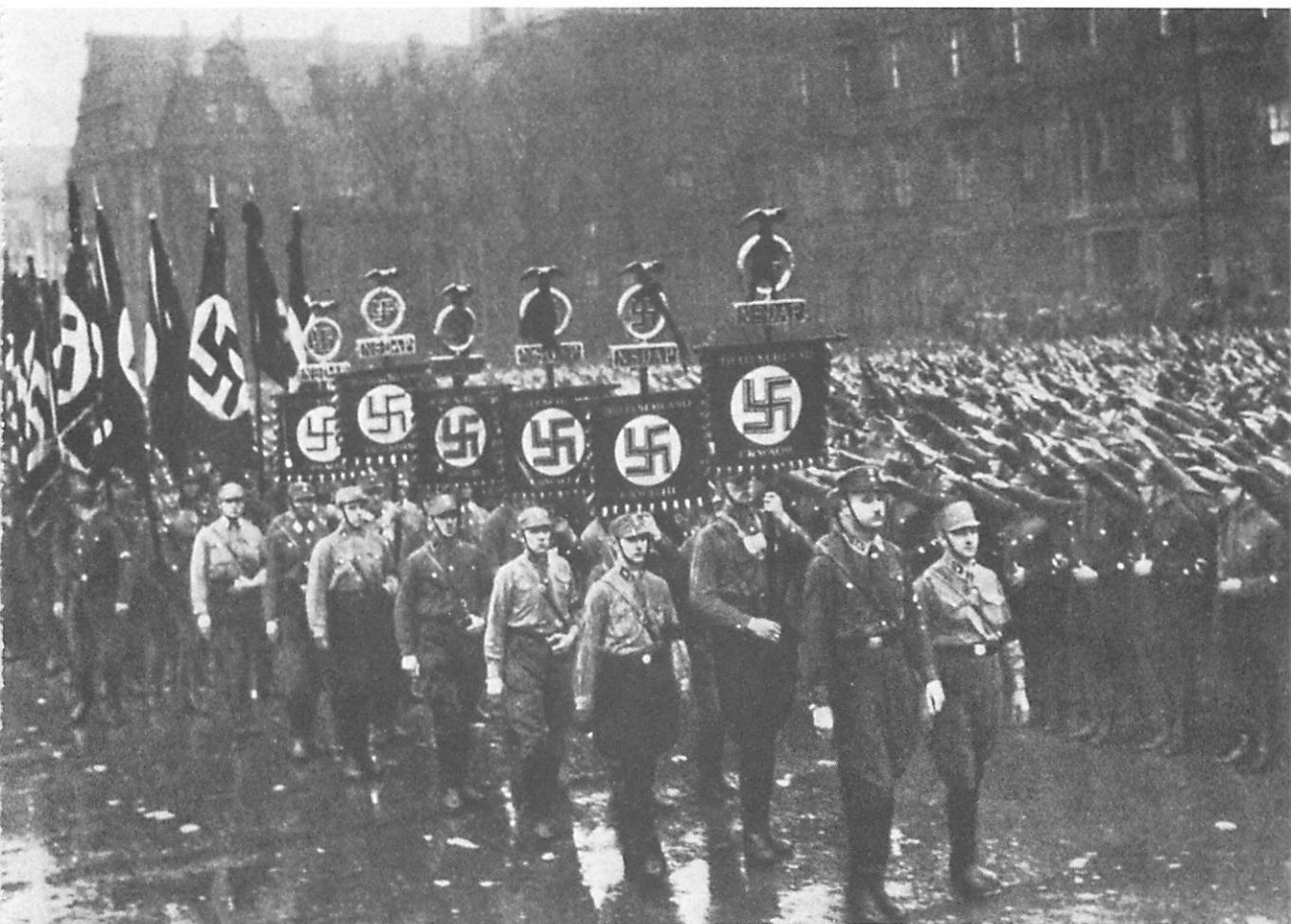
fourteen years, become the head of a major world power, is truly amazing. His ability as an orator was extraordinary. Judged by his ability to move people to significant action, it is likely that Hitler was the most effective orator in all of history. Finally, the fiendish uses to which he put his power, once he had attained it, will not soon be forgotten.

It is probable that no figure in history has had more influence upon his own generation than Adolf Hitler. In addition to the tens of millions of people who died in the war that he instigated, or in the Nazi concentration camps, there were millions more who were made homeless or whose lives were entirely disrupted as a result of the fighting.

Any estimate of Hitler's influence must take into consideration two other factors. First, much of what actually occurred under his leadership would probably not have occurred at all had it not been for Hitler. (In this respect, he stands in sharp contrast to such persons as, say, Charles Darwin or Simón Bolívar.) It is true, of course, that the situation in Germany and in Europe provided Hitler with an opportunity. His militaristic and anti-Semitic remarks, for example, certainly struck a responsive chord in many of his listeners. There is no sign, however, that most Germans in the 1920s or 1930s either wanted or intended their government to follow a policy nearly as extreme as Hitler's proved, and there is little indication that other potential German leaders would have done the same thing. Nor, in fact, were the actual events of the Hitler era even approximately predicted by any outside observer.

Second, the entire Nazi movement was dominated by a single leader to an extraordinary degree. Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and others all played major roles in the rise of Communism. But National Socialism had no significant leader before Hitler, and none after him. He led the Nazis to power, and maintained his leadership throughout their period in power. When he died, the Nazi party and the government it headed died with him.

But though Hitler's influence on his own generation was so enormous, the effects of his actions upon future ages seem to be



*Nazi soldiers, 1933.*

rather slight. Hitler totally failed to accomplish any of his major goals, and what little effect he appears to have had on later generations seems to be in the opposite direction from what he intended. For example, Hitler was interested in expanding German influence and territory. But his territorial conquests, although very large, were ephemeral, and today Germany has less territory than it did when Hitler took office. It was Hitler's consum-

ing passion to destroy the Jews; but fifteen years after Hitler took office, an independent Jewish state came into existence for the first time in 2,000 years. Hitler hated both Communism and Russia. However, at his death, and partly as a result of the war he started, the Russians were able to extend their control over a large part of eastern Europe, and Communist influence in the world was greatly expanded. Hitler despised democracy and hoped to destroy it, not just in other nations, but in Germany, too. Nevertheless, Germany is a functioning democracy today, and her citizens appear to have far less tolerance for authoritarian rule than any generation of Germans before Hitler's time ever had.

What does this strange combination of enormous influence in his own day and relatively little influence on future generations add up to? Hitler's effect upon the world of his day was so enormous that it is obvious that he must be ranked fairly high on this list. But he surely must be placed well behind such figures as Shih Huang Ti, Augustus Caesar, and Genghis Khan, whose actions influenced the world for centuries after they lived. The closest parallels are with Napoleon and Alexander the Great. In the short run, Hitler disturbed the world even more than those two men did; he has been ranked slightly below them because of their greater long-term influence.