World Leaders: Adolf Hitler

By Biography.com Editors and A+E Networks, adapted by Newsela staff on 07.22.16

Word Count 1,090

Synopsis: Adolf Hitler was born in Austria in 1889. He rose to power in German politics as leader of the National Socialist German Workers' Party, also known as the Nazi Party. Hitler was chancellor of Germany from 1933 to 1945, and dictator from 1934 to 1945. His policies precipitated World War II and the Holocaust, when millions of Jews were killed. Hitler committed suicide with his wife, Eva Braun, on April 30, 1945, in his Berlin bunker.

Early Years

Dictator Adolf Hitler was born in Braunau am Inn, Austria, on April 20, 1889. When he was 3 years old, his family moved from Austria to Germany, where he showed an early interest in German nationalism.

During World War I, Hitler served in the German army, though he was still an Austrian citizen. He was often far away from the front lines, but was present at a number of significant battles, and was wounded in battle and decorated for bravery.

Hitler was shocked by Germany's surrender in 1918, and believed that the German army had been betrayed by its leaders.
After World War I, Hitler worked as an intelligence officer in the German military. While monitoring the activities of the German Workers’ Party (DAP), Hitler became interested in many of the anti-Semitic, nationalist and anti-communist ideas of the party. Hitler joined the DAP in 1919.

To increase its appeal, the DAP changed its name to the National Socialist German Workers’ Party, often shortened to the Nazi party. Hitler designed the party banner, featuring a swastika in a white circle on a red background. He became known for his hateful speeches against rival politicians, communists and Jews. In 1921, he became Nazi party chairman.

Hitler’s speeches began attracting regular audiences. Early followers included Ernst Röhm, the head of the Nazi paramilitary organization, the Sturmabteilung (SA), which protected meetings and frequently attacked political opponents.

On November 8, 1923, Hitler and the SA stormed a public meeting of 3,000 people at a beer hall in Munich. He announced that the national revolution had begun and declared a new government. However, after a short struggle and 20 deaths, the coup to overthrow the government failed.

Hitler was arrested and tried for high treason. He served less than a year in prison, during which time he dictated most of the first volume of “Mein Kampf” (“My Struggle”) to his deputy. The book laid out his plans for transforming German society into one based on race.

**Rise To Power**

During the Great Depression in Germany, Germans were ambivalent toward the government and increasingly open to extremist options. In 1932, Hitler ran against Paul von Hindenburg for the presidency and came in second with 35 percent of the vote. Hindenburg reluctantly agreed to appoint Hitler as chancellor to promote political balance.

Hitler used his position to form a legal dictatorship. He suspended people’s basic rights and allowed people to be detained without trial. Hitler also passed a law which gave his cabinet full legislative powers for four years and allowed deviations from the constitution.

With full control over the legislative and executive branches of government, Hitler and his political allies intimidated their opposing parties into disbanding. On July 14, 1933, the Nazi Party was declared the only legal political party in Germany.

Hitler’s political enemies were rounded up and shot in an operation that lasted from June 30 to July 2, 1934. Those killed included Röhm and other SA leaders who had supported Hitler but wanted more power.
The day before Hindenburg’s death in August 1934, the cabinet abolished the office of president, giving its powers to the chancellor. Hitler was formally declared leader, and he immediately began to mobilize for war. Germany withdrew from the League of Nations, and Hitler announced a massive expansion of Germany’s armed forces.

Hitler also introduced social reform measures, including anti-smoking campaigns. Hitler refrained from consuming meat or alcohol, and he told graphic stories at dinners about the slaughter of animals to shame fellow diners.

A main Nazi concept was the notion of racial purity. New laws banned marriage between non-Jewish and Jewish Germans and deprived “non-Aryans” of German citizenship. Hitler’s started eugenic policies aimed at making Germans genetically superior. First, Hitler targeted children with physical or developmental disabilities, and later authorized a euthanasia program for adults with disabilities.

Between 1939 and 1945, Nazis caused the deaths of 11 million to 14 million people. Among them, were about 6 million Jews, two-thirds of Europe’s Jewish population. Deaths took place in concentration camps and through mass executions. Other persecuted groups included Poles, communists, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses and trade unionists, among others. Hitler probably never visited the concentration camps and never spoke publicly about the killings.

World War II

In 1938, Hitler and several other European leaders signed the Munich Agreement. It reversed part of the Versailles Treaty that had ended World War I. Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Soon after, Britain and France declared war on Germany.

In 1940, Hitler invaded Norway, Denmark, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Belgium, and bombed the United Kingdom, intending to invade. Germany formed the Axis alliance with Japan and Italy to stop the United States from supporting the British.

In 1941, Hitler invaded the Soviet Union. German troops seized a huge area before they were stopped by Soviet troops outside Moscow.

On December 7, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Hitler was now at war against a coalition that included the world’s largest empire (Britain), the world’s greatest financial power (the U.S.) and the world's largest army (the Soviet Union).

Germany’s military and economic position deteriorated along with Hitler’s health and military judgment. In late 1942, German forces failed to seize the Suez Canal, and suffered defeats at the Battle of Stalingrad and the Battle of Kursk. On June 6, 1944, the Western Allied armies landed in northern France.
Death And Legacy

By early 1945, the Soviets had driven the German army back into Western Europe, and the Allies were advancing into Germany. On April 29, 1945, Hitler married his girlfriend, Eva Braun. The next day, the couple committed suicide, afraid of being captured by enemy troops. Berlin fell on May 2, 1945, and five days later, Germany surrendered unconditionally to the Allies.

Hitler began a world war, leaving behind a devastated and impoverished Eastern and Central Europe, including Germany. His policies inflicted great suffering and resulted in the death of an estimated 40 million people. Hitler's defeat marked the end of a phase of European history dominated by Germany, and the defeat of fascism.