Adolf Hitler (AY-dawlf HIHT-uhhr) was the fourth of Alois and Klara (née Pölzl) Hitler’s six children. The Hitler family moved frequently while Adolf was a child, and although he was reportedly a good student, he failed the sixth grade and eventually left school at the age of sixteen. Hitler later tried unsuccessfully to enroll in the Academy of Arts in Vienna, where he was rejected for “lack of talent.” Bitter and discouraged, he refused to seek other employment avenues and instead continued to work as a struggling painter in Vienna, where it was estimated that he produced more than two thousand paintings and drawings before enlisting in the Bavarian army in 1914. Poverty-stricken, Hitler temporarily resided in a homeless shelter in 1909 and eventually moved into a house for poor working men in 1910. The early roots of Hitler’s anti-Semitism are traceable to his time spent in Vienna, where resentment and dislike of Jews was common among Austrians.

**Database:** Topic Overviews 6-12

**Adolf Hitler**

*German chancellor (1933–1945)*

- **Born:** April 20, 1889
- **Birthplace:** Braunau am Inn, Austro-Hungarian Empire (now in Austria)
- **Died:** April 30, 1945
- **Place of death:** Berlin, Germany

**Cause of notoriety:** In addition to his goal of complete Germanic domination, Hitler aspired to rid the world of Jews. Although no specific order from Hitler authorizing the extermination of the Jews exists, evidence does suggest that in the fall of 1941, Hitler and his deputy Heinrich Himmler agreed in principle to mass extermination. Between 1939 and 1945, the Schutzstaffel (SS), under Himmler’s direction, systematically killed approximately eleven million people (some estimates are twice or three times as high), six million of whom were Jews; in addition, non-Jewish Poles, alleged communists or political opponents, Roman Catholics, Protestants, physically and mentally handicapped persons, Roma (Gypsies), and trade unionists were also killed in the Holocaust.

**Active:** 1939–1945

**Locale:** Germany; Europe

**Early Life**

Adolf Hitler (AY-dawlf HIHT-uhhr) was the fourth of Alois and Klara (née Pölzl) Hitler’s six children. The Hitler family moved frequently while Adolf was a child, and although he was reportedly a good student, he failed the sixth grade and eventually left school at the age of sixteen. Hitler later tried unsuccessfully to enroll in the Academy of Arts in Vienna, where he was rejected for “lack of talent.” Bitter and discouraged, he refused to seek other employment avenues and instead continued to work as a struggling painter in Vienna, where it was
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Adolf Hitler. (Library of Congress)

After previously escaping military service in Austria (a crime for which he was arrested by the Austrian army), he enlisted in the Sixteenth Bavarian Reserve Infantry regiment during the early days of World War I. Hitler saw considerable action during World War I; he served in France and Belgium and received several military distinctions, including the Iron Cross Second Class and the Iron Cross First Class. Although described as a somewhat sloppy soldier, Hitler displayed fearlessness in battle, often volunteering for dangerous missions and eventually receiving the Wound Badge (equivalent to an American Purple Heart) for injuries sustained in October of 1916. Two years later, in October, 1918, Hitler was admitted to a military field hospital for temporary blindness brought on by a poisonous gas attack. Historians now believe that Hitler’s blindness may in fact have been the result of a hysterical reaction to Germany’s defeat. Military physicians and a psychiatric specialist who examined Hitler found him unfit to command subordinates and suggested that he was dangerously psychotic.

Hitler’s experiences in World War I greatly influenced him and served as the catalyst for his belief that he was Germany’s savior. Although not a German citizen until 1932, he had become a fanatical German patriot during the war and was appalled by the surrender and subsequent conditions of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. Most Germans, Hitler in particular, perceived the harsh stipulations of the treaty as imposing humiliation and degradation on the German people and nation. Germany’s discontent with the terms of Versailles proved an important factor in the sociopolitical conditions under which Hitler began to operate during the 1920’s.

Political Career

During 1919, Hitler became involved with the small nationalist political organization, the German Workers’ Party (DAP), which espoused anti-Marxist and anti-Semitic philosophies. He quickly rose through the ranks of the DAP to become the party’s spokesperson and leading propagandist. In July of 1921, after an attempted ousting by the DAP’s original members, Hitler’s demands for dictatorial power were met: He was anointed führer (leader) of the party, the name of which Hitler changed from DAP to the Nationalist Socialist German Workers’ Party, or Nazi Party. In 1923, inspired by fascist Italian leader Benito Mussolini’s March on Rome, Hitler attempted a coup, known now as the Beer Hall Putsch; it failed and resulted in his arrest and conviction
for conspiracy to commit treason, a crime for which he was sentenced to five years' imprisonment. While at Landsberg Prison, Hitler dictated his infamous autobiography Mein Kampf (1925-1927; English translation, 1933) to his deputy Rudolf Hess (who would later become deputy führer, third in command of Nazi Germany). This book would outline Nazi thought and later serve as the political platform of the Nazi Party.

When Hitler was released early from prison in December of 1924, he faced a dwindling Nazi Party in desperate need of rebuilding. Hitler attempted to incorporate nationalistic sentiments with accusations against “international Jewry” in order to garner electoral support. However, he was largely unsuccessful. The party soon learned to utilize subtler propaganda techniques, blaming Germany’s problems on the failures of the Weimar Republic. These messages and their subtext resonated better with the populace. While rebuilding his party, Hitler also introduced a new method of party organization that included unquestioning obedience to superiors and devolution of power and authority from the top down.

With Hitler at the helm, the Nazi Party found itself in politically advantageous circumstances when the Great Depression hit Europe. The Nazis rose from relative obscurity to win 107 seats in the Reichstag in September, 1930, becoming the second largest party in Germany. Not quite three years later, on January 30, 1933, Germany’s president, Paul von Hindenburg, appointed Hitler as chancellor. Following Hindenburg’s death on August 2, 1934, Hitler seized absolute power, refusing to hold new presidential elections and instead passing a law that combined the offices of president and chancellor. Shortly thereafter, Hitler ordered every member of the military to swear an oath of personal allegiance to him.

Hitler’s government pushed through sweeping reforms during the first several years of his reign, which buttressed the campaign for absolute control. Nazi Germany also instituted policies, to be enforced by Hitler’s Gestapo (secret state police), that targeted Jews, communists, and habitual criminals. During the early to mid-1930’s, several pieces of legislation were passed restricting the civil rights of Jews and limiting their economic opportunity. These policies fueled the emigration of thousands of Germany’s Jews and led to increasingly violent tactics, such as Kristallnacht (the night of broken glass) in November, 1938, when Jewish businesses and synagogues were destroyed. Hitler’s vision of world domination became increasingly apparent after he reoccupied the Rhineland and invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, effectively starting World War II. Hitler would threaten Europe throughout the war until his death by suicide in his Berlin bunker with his mistress Eva Braun, on April 30, 1945. Allied victory in the European theater was declared one week later.

Impact

There is perhaps no other individual whose name is more synonymous with evil than that of Adolf Hitler. Hitler’s legacy is one of racism, hatred, and destruction, and he remains vilified across time and space. The effects of World War II and the Holocaust are almost incalculable and the level of destruction wrought on the world by Hitler’s vision almost incomprehensible.

On a global level, Hitler’s world war set the stage for what would come to define the remainder of the twentieth century—the battle for military and economic supremacy between the newly created superpowers, the United States and Soviet Union. The events of World War II opened a political vacuum on the European continent that was filled by the Soviets, consequently triggering a reaction formation from the United States, which manifested itself across a range of issues and events, from the space race to the proposal of a Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars) in the early 1980’s, to ongoing troubles in Korea and Vietnam. Had Europe been less susceptible to foreign meddling in the years immediately following World War II, the Cold War may not have unfolded in such a manner. European weakness was ultimately traceable to the actions engaged by Hitler.

Bibliography

Davidson, Eugene. The Unmaking of Adolf Hitler. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996. Print. Follows the author's The Making of Hitler (1977), which addressed Hitler's rise to power. The second volume focuses on Hitler from the Nazi seizure of power through his death, with an emphasis on events prior to 1939. Dissects the various relationships between Hitler and his political allies and foes, cleverly demonstrating that these were often one and the same over time. Academic historians will be disappointed in the lack of incorporation of leading sources and documents such as the Nazi archives. Hitler's cult of personality is portrayed in great detail in a somewhat positive manner that seems to minimize the vast social harm and devastation to humanity normally attributed to Hitler.


Giblin, James Cross. The Life and Death of Adolf Hitler. New York: Clarion, 2002. Print. A biography that focuses heavily on the dictator's early life experiences, particularly his troubled family life during his formative adolescent years. In-depth coverage is also given to Hitler's military experiences prior to World War II and how they influenced the development of the Nazi political party in prewar Germany. Numerous reviews cite the chapter on anti-Semitism as a leading academic reference source. Little attention is given to the rise of the Nazi Party and Hitler's ascension to political and social dominance. Rather, the emphasis is on the lingering effects of Hitler and the Nazi experience. Includes eyewitness accounts that support the author's contention that world politics continue to reflect Nazi history.


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