

# **The Rise of Hitler**

Teacher Created Materials, Inc. World War II.

## **Hitler Becomes a Leader**

Hitler had a genius for politics that led him to create an organization that would eventually give him absolute power and the highest office in the German state. His rise in the political arena is remarkable. As a young man living in Vienna, Austria, and determined to become an artist, he barely managed to make a living and spent several years in a homeless shelter. To avoid serving in the Austro-Hungarian army, Hitler moved to Munich, in Bavaria (the southern, Catholic province of Germany). While there, the First World War broke out, and he quickly signed up to serve in the German army. He was a loner, but he served with distinction. A Jewish officer nominated Hitler, and he received the Iron Cross for bravery in combat, a decoration that was seldom given to an ordinary enlisted man. At the time of peace in November 1918, Hitler was in a hospital, temporarily blinded in a gas attack. He maintained that the darkest day in his entire life was when he heard of Germany's surrender.

Upon his release from the army, Hitler joined the small political party in Munich that called itself the German National Socialists Workers Party. He was not one of the original members, but he quickly became the moving force among the handful who were party members. It was also at this point in his life that Hitler realized he had a special gift, a talent for speaking that memorized (hypnotized) large crowds and held them spell bound. He was like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, the character in the German fairy tale who played a flute and lured thousands of rats (and ultimately, the children) away from the town. Hitler's instrument was his voice, and his skill and power as a public speaker, and his message, like the piper's tune, would eventually lead the German nation to their own destruction.

## **Losing World War I**

In 1918, when the German generals realized that the war was lost, they asked for a temporary peace. They asked for an armistice, hopeful that the Allies would be generous and base the final treaty on Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points. Instead, the Allies presented the Germans with a final treaty that was put together without German input. The Germans were told to sign in 24 hours or else the Allies would invade Germany. A new government was in power in Germany. The old Empire was gone, as was the Kaiser (Emperor), who had vacated the throne. In its place was a new republic. Political chaos and revolution had swept away the old monarchy, and now there was a republic governed by a coalition in which the Socialist Party was prominent. The seat of this new government was in Weimar, so, fittingly, it came to be known as the Weimar Republic. It was the delegation and representatives from this new government of the Weimar Republic who were told by the Allies to "sign, or else!" They signed. The treaty saddled the Germans with a huge reparations payment (to pay the victors the cost of the war). Germany lost some areas of its territory in East Prussia (the largest province of Germany, in the northeast) to the newly resurrected (reborn) nation of Poland. Germany was blamed for the war, and the Allies threatened to place the Kaiser and other Germans on trial as "war criminals." Germany was forbidden to have an army larger than 100,000 men and very little in the way of a navy and air force. All of the German colonies in Africa and Asia were turned over to the Allied powers. French soldiers occupied the Saar, Germany's richest industrial region for iron ore and coal, as "security" to ensure that Germany would make its reparation payments on time.

## **Reactions of the German People**

When the German people finally realized what the Treaty of Versailles had in store for the nation, they sighed a collective groan. The reparation payments alone were a burden that would place Germany's economy in debt for generations to come. Hitler and his political party, and other nationalistic parties throughout Germany, spoke out against the treaty and its provisions. Their anger and hatred was also directed at the politicians who signed the agreement, and their

feelings were shared by many Germans. They referred to the Treaty of Versailles as the Diktat, a treaty that Germany was forced to sign and whose provisions were “dictated” to the German people. Many Germans accused the Socialist and Catholic Center Party politicians of stabbing the country in the back, insisting that the German Army could have continued to fight had it not been for the sneaking and skulking politicians who were so quick to surrender. Hitler and his Nazis frequently condemned the treaty and swore to tear it up, vowing to destroy the Weimar Republic and the “November criminals” (the socialist government) who surrendered to the Allies in 1918. (The term Nazi is a shortened version of “National Socialist” – Hitler’s political party was the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei [the NSDAP], in translation meaning the “German National Socialist Workers Party.”)

### **Hitler Influences Audiences and Delivers His Message**

In 1920, Hitler gained control of the small Nazi Party. The two factors that led to his dominant place in the leadership were his charisma (magnetism) and his skill and power as a speaker. He was a dynamic rabble-rouser who used theatrical gestures and commanding words to control his audience. People were immediately locked in to his message, and they bonded with Hitler because he was telling them exactly how they felt and saying everything they wanted to hear. He told the Germans that if the nation was going through hard times it was because of the injustices heaped upon Germany by the Diktat signed at Versailles. Hitler’s audiences were reminded again and again that the economy was a mess because of the unfair reparations payments Germany had to pay. In every speech, Hitler placed the blame squarely on the socialists, whom he slandered as the “November criminals,” saying they betrayed Germany at the end of the war and “stabbed the German Army in the back” when they surrendered and signed the treaty.

The greatest blame was usually saved for last, when Hitler, with his shrieking voice filled with hate, accused the Jews of a conspiracy to destroy the German people and the German nation. It was the “Big Lie” repeated all over Germany by the Nazis, that the Jews were rich bankers and moneylenders who profited from the war and were parasites living off the German people. Hitler and the Nazi bullies conveniently forgot that thousands of German Jews fought bravely for Germany during the First World War and that 17,000 gave their lives for their country. Time and again, in Munich’s beer gardens, were the Germans mixed their politics with beer drinking, Hitler made the same speech over and over. Without a trace of shame in his voice, he lied to the German people when he blamed the Jews for the hard times in Germany. Hitler lied to the German people when he said Jews were to blame for inflation. The lie became even bigger when he placed the blame for the reparations on the Jews. It became the “Big Lie” when he said the Jews were to blame for Germany’s defeat. The “Big Lie” grew bigger still when Hitler blamed the Jews for keeping the German nation weak and depriving the German people of their rightful place as a world power.

### **The Beer Garden Putsch**

In 1923, Hitler and his Nazi followers attempted a Putsch (overthrow) to take over the government of Munich in Bavaria and march on Berlin. Hitler and his Nazi followers interrupted a political rally in one of Munich’s beer gardens. Firing several pistol shots into the ceiling, Hitler declared that the Nationalist Socialist revolution was taking place and that the Nazis were prepared to march on Berlin and take over the government. The display was a fiasco, and Hitler and a few of his followers were placed on trial. Hitler served less than a year in prison, received a suspended sentence for his act of treason, and used the time to write his book, *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle). Sentencing Hitler to a short prison term illustrated the leniency of the judges and indicates how most of the German people felt about the Weimar Republic. Germany admired the nationalists like Hitler who sought to restore Germany’s glory and power.

## **Hitler Organizes the Nazi Party**

There were many Germans who did not swallow the message Hitler was sending. The Communist Party was powerful in Germany, and they came to Hitler's rallies to openly harass and ridicule the Nazis. Hitler organized many of his followers into the SA Sturmabteilung, (the street thugs who became the "Storm Troopers"). This brown-shirted private army took on the communist gangs and others who came to disrupt the Nazi political rallies. They fought to control the streets of the towns and cities when the Nazis held their meetings. In addition to his military creation, Hitler designed the Nazi emblem: a blood-red flag with a large white circle containing at its center the black swastika (the hooked cross). Within the SA, the Nazis organized a special Hitler "bodyguard," called the SS (Schutzstaffel), which would eventually grow into an immense police organization that would terrorize all of Germany and occupied Europe. His Storm Troopers in their brown uniforms, with banners flying overhead and the beat of drums and blare of bugles to lead the way, turned the Nazi rallies and meetings into a pageantry that made the German people hold their heads high with pride. The Germans could see and feel the power of the Nazis, and they no longer felt weak and humiliated.

## **A Lull for Hitler and His Nazis**

While the German economy was in tatter in the early 1920's, the Nazis had been growing in numbers. But by 1925, Germany was showing signs of recovery, and the Nazis were losing their popularity. The Weimar Republic seemed to be getting everything together, keeping a tight reign on inflation, and helping the economy to hum. They brought a degree of political stability to Germany and negotiated manageable repartition payments to the Allies. Memberships in the Nazi Party slowed to a trickle in these hard years of struggle, but Hitler held on to his leadership. He was the Fuhrer (Leader) of the Nazi party, and all the members swore a personal oath of loyalty to him. He was unchallenged in his position as party leader. His whole life and his entire being were devoted to his Nazi politics, and he hoped to eventually gain total power in Germany through legal elections.

## **The Depression Hits Germany**

Hitler and the Nazis got a second chance. In 1929, the stock market crashed in New York City, and the United States was plunged into the Great Depression, which lasted through the 1930s and swept through the whole world. The Germans, too, were plunged into an economic depression that wiped out the lifesaving of Germany's middle-class citizens. It made millions jobless and shut down many major industries and factories. Now, many Germans in their desperation turned to Hitler and his Nazis. In many provincial elections, the Nazis were voted into office. In major elections over the next three years, the Nazis pulled in millions of votes, increasing their numbers in the German Reichstag (Parliament) and becoming the largest political party in Germany. Back in the 1920s, Hitler and his followers were regarded as "provincials" (country bumpkins) from Bavaria. Suddenly, with Germany in the grips of this economic depression, Hitler was pushed to center stage in national politics.

## **Hitler's Political Policies: The Nazi Program**

Hitler's moment had come. His message had new meaning, and millions of Germans began to pay attention. It was a message repeated countless times by Hitler and his followers to people who were desperate for a return to prosperity. Hitler and the Nazis vowed to destroy the Versailles Treaty, to make Germany a great power once again with its rightful place in the world. Hitler promised to rebuild Germany's military and put people back to work, jump-starting the economy again. Hitler promised that the Saar would be returned to Germany and that those territories that were lost in the east, in Poland and other places where many Germans lived, would be regained. In addition, Hitler demanded the return of Germany's lost overseas colonies. The Nazis swore they would make the Jews pay for the woes that had befallen the German people.

## **Hitler's Movement Grows in Strength**

In 1929, the Nazis had only a few seats in the Reichstag. By 1932, the Nazis had over 200 seats in Germany's parliament and were the largest political party in the nation. Hundreds of thousands of Germans joined the Nazi Party. The ranks of Hitler's Storm Troopers numbered 400,000, four times the number of soldiers in the German Army permitted by the Treaty of Versailles. The Nazi Storm Troopers controlled the streets of major cities and even challenged the Communists in their working-class slums. Germans by the thousands joined the Nazi Party daily, and they voted for Hitler by the millions because his message gave them hope. In 1923, in the early days of the party, the Nazis won 800,000 votes. In the 1930 elections, they had 6.5 million votes. Two years later, 14 million Germans cast their votes for Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. They were people who had lost their jobs and their life's savings, and there was Germany's Führer, the man of the hour, who would change their lives and give them hope that the nation would once again be powerful and respected throughout the world. Germans believed in a "Leader" as a man of destiny, chosen by what they believed to be the divine hand of God to bring the people back to their greatness. Hitler promised the people "Recht und Gesetz,"—"Law and Order"—and if the Nazis cracked open the heads of a few communists and bloodied their noses, that was fine, as long as chaos and political instability were swept away. Germans took pride in seeing the marching ranks of the SA and SS, for they were witnessing Hitler and Germany's rise to greatness and power.

## **Power**

While Hitler and the Nazis never received 51% of the votes in any national elections, they still remained the largest political party in Germany. This meant that Hitler and his Nazi followers could not be ignored; they were major players in German politics. If Germany were to have a government that worked, bringing the political chaos and economic hard times to an end, Hitler would have to be brought into the government. Whether Germany's other politicians did not trust him and his Nazis, whether they hated him, loathed him, or despised him was of little consequence. One way or another, Hitler and his Nazis would have an important role in the new government. With 44% of the vote, the Nazis formed a coalition (a pact) with the other right-wing nationalist parties, who had 8% of the vote, giving Hitler 52% and political power. For Adolf Hitler, his life's ambition became a reality on January 30, 1933, when President Hindenburg finally asked him to be the Chancellor (Prime Minister) of Germany.