

## A Biography of Adolf Hitler

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### Early Days - 1889-1908

Adolf Hitler was born on April 20th 1889 in Braunau-am-Inn, Austria. The town is near to the Austro-German border, and his father, Alois, worked as a customs officer on the border crossing. His mother, Klara, had previously given birth to two other children by Alois, (Gustav and Ida) but they both died in their infancy. Adolf attended school from the age of six and the family lived in various villages around the town of Linz, east of Braunau. By this time Adolf had a younger brother, Edmund, but he only lived until the age of six. In 1896, Klara gave birth to Adolf's sister, Paula, who survived to outlive him.



Adolf Hitler grew up with a poor record at school and left, before completing his tuition, with an ambition to become an artist. Alois Hitler had died when Adolf was thirteen and Klara brought up Adolf and Paula on her own. Between the ages of sixteen and nineteen, young Adolf neither worked to earn his keep, nor formally studied, but had gained an interest in politics and history. During this time he unsuccessfully applied for admission to the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts.

### The Vagabond - 1909-1913

Klara Hitler died from cancer when Adolf was nineteen and from then onwards he had no relatives willing or able to support him. So, in 1909, he moved to Vienna in the hope of somehow earning a living. Within a year he was living in homeless shelters and eating at charity soup-kitchens. He had declined to take regular employment and took occasional menial jobs and sold some of his paintings or advertising posters whenever he could to provide sustenance.

### Munich and The Great War - 1913-1918

In 1913 Adolf Hitler, still a penniless vagrant, moved to Munich in southern Germany. At the outbreak of the First World War, in 1914, he volunteered for service in the German army and was accepted into the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment. Hitler fought bravely in the war and was promoted to corporal and decorated with both the Iron Cross Second Class and First Class, the latter of which he wore until his dying day [ironically the regimental captain who recommended him for the award was Jewish]. The day of the announcement of the armistice in 1918, Hitler was in hospital recovering from temporary blindness caused by a British gas attack in the Ypres Salient. In December 1918 he returned to his regiment back in Munich.



### Early Politics - 1918-1919

Between December 1918 and March 1919 Hitler worked at a prisoner-of-war camp at Traunstein before returning again to Munich. Shortly after his return he witnessed a takeover bid by local Communists who seized power before being ousted by the army. After he gave evidence at an investigation into the takeover he was asked to become part of a local army organization which was responsible for persuading returning soldiers

not to turn to communism or pacifism. During his training for this tasks and during his subsequent duties he was able to hone his oratory skills. As part of his duties he was also asked to spy on certain local political groups, and during a meeting of the German Workers' Party he became so incensed by one of the speeches that he delivered a fierce harangue to the speaker. The founder of the party, Anton Drexler, was so impressed by Hitler's tirade that he asked him to join their organization. Hitler, after some thought, finally agreed to join the committee and became their seventh official in September 1919.

### **The First Hofbrauhaus Speech - 1919-1920**

Given responsibility for publicity and propoganda, Hitler first succeeded in attracting over a hundred people to a meeting in held October at which he delivered his first speech to a large audience. The meeting and his oratory were a great success, and subsequently in February 1920 he organized a much larger event for a crowd of nearly two thousand in the Munich Hofbrauhaus. Hitler himself was not the main speaker, but when his turn came he succeeded in calming a rowdy audience and presented a twenty-five point programme of ideas which were to be the basis of the party. The name of the party was itself changed to the National Socialist German Workers Party (or Nazi for short) on April 1st 1920.

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Not long after the February speech he was discharged from the army. Hitler continued to expand his influence in the party and began to form a private group of thugs which he used to quash disorder at party meetings and later to break up rival party's meetings. This group subsequently became the Sturmabteilung or S.A. - Hitler's brown shirted storm troopers. He also became the regular main speaker at party events from then onwards, attracting large crowds for each meeting. During the summer of 1920 Hitler chose the swastika as the Nazi party emblem.

### **Leader of the Nazi Party - 1921**

By 1921 Adolf Hitler had virtually secured total control of the Nazi party, however this was not to the liking of all Nazis. In July of that year, whilst Hitler was away in Berlin, the discontent members of the party proposed a merger with a like-minded political party in Nuremburg in the hope that this would dilute Hitler's influence. On hearing the news of the proposed merger, Hitler rushed back to Munich to confront the party and threatened to resign. The other members were aware that Hitler was bringing in the lion's share of funds into the organization, from the collections following his speeches at meetings and from other sympathetic sources. Thus they knew they couldn't afford his resignation. Hitler then proceeded to turn the tables on the committee members and forced them to accept him as formal leader of the party with dictatorial powers.

### **The Beer Hall Putsch - 1923**

Up to November 1923 Hitler continued to build up the strength of the Nazi Party. During this time he also plotted to overthrow the German Weimar Republic by force. On November 8th 1923 Hitler led an attempt to take over the local Bavarian Government in Munich in an action that became known as the "Beer Hall Putsch." Despite initially kidnapping the Bavarian officials in the Buergerbraukeller beer hall in Munich and proclaiming a new regime using their names, the coup was not successful. The officials were allowed to escape and re-gain control of the police and the armed forces. The coup was ended on the morning of November 9th, when a column of three thousand SA men headed by Hitler and General Ludendorff (one of the most senior generals of the First World War) were halted on their way to the centre of Munich by armed police. After a brief gunfight, only General Ludendorff and his aide had made it through to the central Plaza, where they were arrested. Hitler had fled the scene and was later arrested and charged with treason. After his trial for treason he was sentenced to five years in Landsberg prison, however he had successfully used the trial itself to gain publicity for himself and his ideas. During his term in prison Hitler began dictating his thoughts and philosophies to Rudolf Hess which became the book "Mein Kampf" (My

Struggle).

### **Re-Building the Nazi Party - 1924-1932**

Hitler was released from Landsberg prison in December 1924 after serving only six months of his sentence. At that time, the Nazi Party and its associated newspapers were banned by the government and Hitler himself was forbidden from making public speeches. The support for National Socialism was waning throughout Germany, their voting figures in elections fell from almost two million in 1924 to 810,000 by 1928 (this gave them only 12 out of a total of 491 representatives in Parliament). However at the same time, Hitler succeeded in increasing the party membership and developed the organization of the party throughout Germany with the help of Gregor Strasser who was responsible for the organization of the Nazi Party in northern Germany. During this period Hitler also created the infamous SS (Schutzstaffel) which was initially intended to be Hitler's bodyguard under the leadership of Heinrich Himmler.

The collapse of the Wall St. stock exchange in 1929 led to a world wide recession which hit Germany especially hard. All loans to Germany from foreign countries dried up, German industrial production slumped and millions were made unemployed. These conditions were beneficial to Hitler and his Nazi campaigning. By July of the following year Chancellor Bruening, without a



parliamentary majority in the Reichstag, was unable to pass a new finance bill and was forced to ask President Hindenburg to dissolve the Reichstag and call for new elections for the coming September. Hitler campaigned hard for the Nazi candidates, promising the public a way out of their current hardship. When the results of the election were announced, the Nazi Party had won 6.4 million votes which made them the second largest party in the Reichstag. At this time Hitler also began to win over the support of both the army and the big industrialists, the latter contributing substantially to the finances of the Nazi Party.

### **Hitler Versus Hindenburg - 1932**

In February 1932 Hitler decided to stand against Hindenburg in the forthcoming Presidential election. In order to do this he became a German citizen on 25th February 1932. The result of the election on 13th March 1932 gave Hindenburg 49.6 percent of the vote and Hitler 30.1 percent (two other candidates stood). As Hindenburg failed to win a majority a second election was called. The result of the second election gave Hindenburg 53 percent and Hitler 36.8 percent (one other candidate stood). Thus Hindenburg was re-elected to office and Hitler was forced to wait for another opportunity to win power.

Chancellor Bruening lasted in office until June 1932, unable to maintain popular support his government resigned due to pressure from the President, who had been advised by an influential General called Schleicher. General Schleicher had plotted the overthrow of the cabinet in conspiracy with the Nazis. Power then passed to a Presidential cabinet headed by a new Chancellor, Franz von Papen. New Reichstag elections were also set for the end of July.

### **Nazis Become the Largest Party - 1932**

In the July elections, the Nazi Party won 13,745,000 votes which gave them 230 out of the 608 seats in the Reichstag. Although the Nazis were the largest party, they were still short of a majority. Hitler, however, demanded that he be made Chancellor but was offered only the position of Vice-Chancellor in a coalition government, which he refused.

### **Hitler Becomes Chancellor - 1932-1933**

In September 1932, the Nazi members of the Reichstag, together with support from the Center Party elected the prominent Nazi Herman Goering as President of the Reichstag

(equivalent to House Speaker). Using his new position, Goering managed to prevent the Chancellor from presenting an order to dissolve the Reichstag, whilst a vote of no confidence in the Chancellor and his government was passed. Thus having forced the resignation of the new government, the Reichstag allowed its own dissolution. Although losing 34 of their seats in the following election, the Nazis retained enough influence to assure that Papen would be unable to form a new Government and the Chancellor resigned on 17th of November 1932. After Papen's resignation, Hindenburg still refused to appoint Hitler as chancellor fearing that a Hitler Government would become a dictatorship. The President then tried to re-install Papen as Chancellor, but Papen was unable to gain the support of his own cabinet, including Schleicher who was Minister of Defence. President Hindenburg then appointed Schleicher as Chancellor, the latter having assured the President that he could get the support of the Nazis in the Reichstag. However, Hitler and his Nazi party had other ideas, and Schleicher found that he was unable to win the support of any of the parties in the Reichstag and was forced to resign as Chancellor on January 28th 1933. Finally on January 30th, 1933 President Hindenburg decided to appoint Hitler Chancellor in a coalition government with Papen as Vice-Chancellor.

### **The Burning of the Reichstag - February 1933**

The penultimate step towards Adolf Hitler gaining complete control over the destiny of Germany were taken on the night of 27th February 1933 when the Reichstag was destroyed by fire. The fire was almost certainly planned by the Nazis, Goebbels and Goering in particular. A Dutch communist, Marinus van der Lubbe, was made scapegoat for the fire, but the main outcome was that Hitler was given an excuse to have all the Communist deputies of the Reichstag arrested, and managed to obtain a decree from President Hindenburg giving the Nazi government powers to inter anyone they thought was a threat to the nation. Furthermore the Presidential decree allowed the Nazi government to suppress the free speech of its political opponents. Despite all these advantages, in the elections of March 5th 1933, the Nazis only managed to achieve 44 percent of the votes. Even with the suppression of the Communist deputies, Hitler was still short of an overall majority and nowhere near the two-thirds majority needed for any change in the German constitution.

### **The Enabling Act - March 1933**

The Enabling Act, placed before the Reichstag on 23rd of March 1933 was to allow the powers of legislation to be taken away from the Reichstag and transferred to Hitler's cabinet for a period of four years. The act required a two-thirds majority, but passed easily with the support of the Center and Nationalist parties and the suppression of all Communist deputies and several Social Democrats. Thus dictatorial powers were finally conferred, legally, on Adolf Hitler. By July 14th Hitler had proclaimed a law stating that the Nazi Party was to be the only political party allowed in Germany. The Nazification of Germany was underway. All non-Nazi organizations were disbanded, including political parties and trade unions. The individual German states were stripped of any autonomous powers they might have had and Nazi officials were installed as state governors.

### **The Night of the Long Knives - 1934**

After the initial rise to power of the Nazis, many of them, including the head of the SA Ernst Roehm, wanted to see a further change in the power structure of Germany by taking over control of big businesses and installing the SA as the main army of Germany with the existing army subordinate to it. Hitler however thought differently and wanted to keep the German economy in good shape, reduce unemployment and enable him to quickly re-arm the Wehrmacht. To Hitler, the SA was purely a political force not a military one. Also the ageing President Hindenburg would not survive much longer and Hitler needed the support of the Army if he was to be named as Hindenburg's successor. In May of 1934 Hitler proposed to the chiefs of the Army and the Navy that he would suppress the SA and at the same time expand the Army and Navy if they

would support him as the successor to Hindenburg. The chiefs of the forces readily agreed to Hitler's endorsement. In June Hitler ordered the SA to go on leave for the entire month. However, by that time the rowdiness and lawlessness perpetrated by Nazi thugs had grown to a point where President Hindenburg and his senior generals were considering declaring a state of marshal law and Hitler was threatened with this recourse if he didn't do something to curb these excesses. These threats, coupled with rumours generated by Himmler and Goering concerning Roehm's loyalty to the Fuehrer and an impending coup against Hitler, finally prompted Hitler to order Himmler and Goering to take action against the leaders of the SA. On June 30th 1934 Himmler's SS and Goering's special police arrested and executed the leaders of the SA, including Ernst Roehm, and many others not connected with the SA, but against whom the Nazi leaders had a score to settle. These others included General von Schleicher, the former Chancellor.

### **The Death of Hindenburg August 1934**

President Hindenburg died on August 2nd 1934. Hitler had already agreed with the Cabinet that upon Hindenburg's death the offices of President and Chancellor would be combined. The last wishes of Hindenburg were that upon his death the monarchy should be restored. Hitler managed to suppress these wishes and did not publish the President's will. Having already ensured the support of the Army, Hitler went a step further by making the whole of the armed forces swear an oath of loyalty to him personally. A plebiscite was then held for the public to decide on whether they approved of the changes already made - 90% of voters gave their approval. Thus Hitler had become "Fuehrer and Reich Chancellor" and the title of President was then abolished.

### **"Nazification" - 1934-1937**

During the years following Hitler's consolidation of power he set about the "Nazification" of Germany and its release from the armament restrictions of the Versailles Treaty. Censorship was extreme and covered all aspects of life including the press, films, radio, books and even art. Trade unions were suppressed and replaced with the centralised "Labour Front", which didn't actually function as a trade union. The churches were persecuted and ministers who preached non-Nazi doctrine were frequently arrested by the Gestapo and carted off to concentration camps. All youth associations were abolished and re-formed as a single entity as the Hitler Youth organisation. The Jewish population was increasingly persecuted and ostracised from society and under the Nuremburg Laws of September 1935 Jews were no longer considered to be German citizens and therefore no longer had any legal rights. Jews were no longer allowed to hold public office, not allowed to work in the civil-service, the media, farming, teaching, the stock exchange and eventually barred from practising law or medicine. Hostility towards Jews from other Germans was encouraged and even shops began to deny entry to Jews. From a very early stage, Hitler geared the German economy towards war. He appointed Dr. Hjalmar Schacht minister of economics with instructions to secretly increase armaments production. This was financed in various ways, including using confiscated funds, printing bank notes and mostly by producing government bonds and credit notes.

In September 1936, Goering took over most of Schacht's duties in preparing the war economy and instituted the Four-Year Plan, which was intended to make Germany self-sufficient in four years. This put Germany on a total war economy and entailed strict control of imports, materials prices and wages as well as the creation of factories and industrial plants to produce essential war materials (e.g. synthetic rubber, fuels and steel). Workers were low paid and their freedom to move between jobs was increasingly restricted. Even the workers' recreation time was strictly controlled through the "Strength Through Joy" organisation. Hitler was the law when it came to the judicial system and had the ultimate say over legal actions of any kind. Any judge who was not favourable to the Nazi regime was dismissed, and a "Special Court" for political crimes

and a "Peoples Court" for accusations of treason were introduced. Both of these courts were controlled by the Nazi Party and an unfortunate defendant was extremely unlikely to get a fair trial.

### **Breaking the Versailles Treaty - 1934-1937**

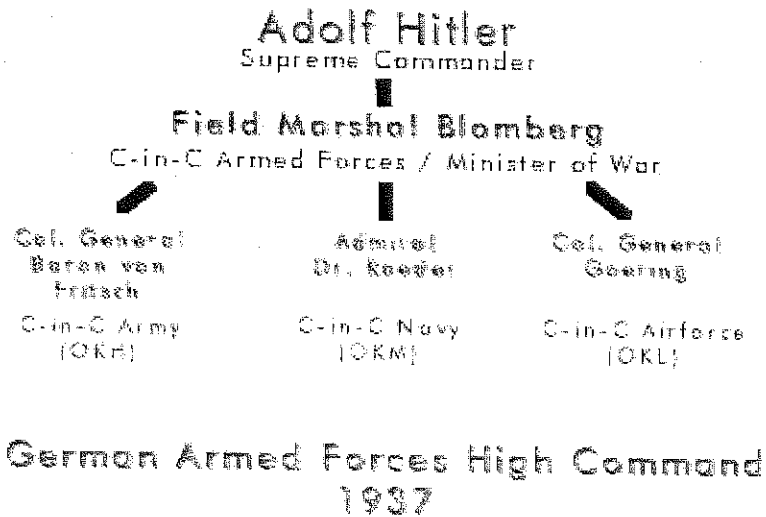
Hitler ordered the army to be trebled in size, from the 100,000 man Versailles Treaty limit, to 300,000 men by October of 1934. This was initially ordered to be carried out under the utmost secrecy. Admiral Raeder, the chief of the navy, was given orders to begin the construction of large warships, way above the maximum size decreed by the Versailles Treaty. The construction of submarines, also forbidden by the Treaty, had already begun secretly by building parts in foreign dockyards ready for assembly. In addition, Goering had also been tasked by Hitler with the training of air force pilots and the design of military aircraft. In March 1935 Hitler decided to take a gamble and test the resolve of Britain and France by authorising Goering to reveal to a British official the existence of the Luftwaffe (German Air Force). Even though this was a direct challenge to the Versailles Treaty, there was little reaction (its existence was already known anyway). Thus Hitler was given encouragement to take further steps. A few days later, Hitler took a further gamble and declared openly the introduction of military service and the creation of an army with 36 divisions (approx. 1/2 million men). Again, a weak reaction from Britain and France allowed Hitler the comfort of knowing that his gamble had paid off. At the same time that Hitler was increasing the strength of the armed forces, he was also following a policy of making speeches proclaiming a desire for peace and the folly of war. He also announced that he had no intention of annexing Austria or re-militarising the Rhineland and would respect all the territorial clauses of the Versailles Treaty. Hitler also announced that he was prepared to mutually disarm the heaviest of weapons and limit the strength of the German Navy. A quote from Hitler at that time: *"Whoever lights the torch of war in Europe can wish for nothing but chaos."*

### **The Re-militarisation of the Rhineland - 1936**

On March 7th 1936 a small force of German troops marched across the Rhine bridges into the demilitarised areas of Germany towards Aachen, Trier and Saarbruecken. Once again neither the French nor British made any move to counter the flagrant breach of the Locarno Pact of 1925, which had been signed willingly by Germany and was supposed to keep these areas west of the Rhine free from German military units. The lack of French reaction was in spite of the fact that the small German force was vastly outnumbered by the French army near the border. Immediately following the re-militarisation of the Rhineland areas, Hitler once again preached in public his desire for peace throughout Europe and offered to negotiate new non-aggression pacts with several countries including France and Belgium. At the same time rapid construction of German defensive fortifications began along the French and Belgian frontiers. Meanwhile Hitler's popularity within Germany was boosted, his position as leader was strengthened and his control over the army generals was secured.

### **Weakening of Austrian Security and the Birth of the Axis - 1936**

The security that Hitler had gained for Germany from the military stronghold in the Rhineland meant less security for those countries in Central Europe (e.g. Austria and Czechoslovakia) who were reliant on a swift response from France in the event of German aggression. This led the Austrian Government, headed by Dr. Schuschnigg, during the summer of 1936, to begin a course of appeasement of Hitler by, for example, giving Austrian Nazis influential positions within the government in return for a pledge from Hitler to confirm his recognition of Austrian sovereignty. The position of Austria was further undermined in October 1936 when the Italian dictator, Mussolini, who had previously pledged to maintain Austrian independence, formed an alliance with Hitler. This alliance, which became known as the Rome-Berlin Axis had been formed following the German and Italian support of fellow fascist, General Franco, in the Spanish Civil War. The Axis partnership included an agreement on a common foreign policy between the two countries.



[To be continued...]

**About This Article:**

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