

## **The rise of Nazi Germany (1919-1938)**

*The rise of Nazi Germany was the capstone of the inter-war period, and led to the outbreak of World War II, shattering the tenuous peace. The Nazi regime's progress was paralleled by the life of its leader, Adolf Hitler. Born in a small town in Austria, Hitler dreamed of being an artist. Unable to demonstrate sufficient artistic skill for entrance into the art academy in Vienna, he did odd jobs and developed an interest in politics. In 1914, Hitler joined the German army, and earned the iron cross for bravery as a message-carrier. He was immensely disturbed by the German defeat in World War I, and blamed the loss on the socialists and Jews, who he said had surrendered the nation.*

*In 1920, Hitler seized control in the German Workers Party, changing its name to the National Socialist German Workers Party, called the Nazi Party for short. On November 9, 1923, Hitler and World War I hero General Ludendorff attempted a small revolution known as the Beer Hall Putsch. Hitler had jumped onto a beer hall table and proclaimed the current Weimar government overthrown. He and Ludendorff led their supporters into the street, and were promptly arrested. Hitler spent two years in prison, where he wrote *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), which outlined his future policies, centered on the theory of Aryan superiority and Jewish inferiority.*

*Released in 1925, Hitler honed his oratorical skills and worked for the advancement of the Nazi party. Such advancement was slow in coming through the years 1925 to 1929, a fairly stable period in Europe. However, as the world became mired in depression and unemployment rose, so did support for the Nazi Party, which promised employment and a return to glory for the nation. In 1932 the Nazis won 37.3 percent of the popular vote and occupied 230 seats in the German Reichstag. There was little stability in the German government at this time, and seeking a solution to this instability, President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Hitler chancellor on January 30, 1933. Once in office, Hitler dissolved the Reichstag and persuaded Hindenburg to issue a decree granting Hitler authority to prohibit public meetings, the wearing of political uniforms, and publication of dissenting opinions.*

*On February 27, 1933, the Reichstag building burned down and a retarded Dutch boy claiming he worked for the communists was arrested for arson. There is evidence to prove that the Nazis themselves had set the fire, but in any case, Hitler used the incident to persuade Hindenburg to restrict all individual rights and declare that the central government could oust any state government failing to maintain order. Hitler systematically took control of all of the state governments this way. Hitler's private army, the S.A., roamed the streets terrorizing political opponents. Even so, the Nazis only won 43.9 percent of the vote in 1933. To gain a two-thirds majority Hitler formed an alliance with the Nationalist party, and declared the communist party illegal.*

*On March 23, 1933, the Reichstag passed the Enabling Act, giving Hitler the power to make decrees with the status of law, and ending elections. When Hindenburg died in 1934, Hitler fused the positions of chancellor and president into one office: 'Der Fuhrer.' He took control as dictator. Hitler constructed the Third Reich under his dictatorship, using the Gestapo, the secret police, to stifle all dissent.*

*Hitler's vague policy included a planned economy in which the unemployed were put to work on government projects, working hours were shortened to open up jobs, and labor was forbidden to organize. The government oversaw all functions of the economy. All education and speech was controlled. Curricula and textbooks were rewritten to reflect Nazi ideology, and all movies, newspapers, radio, and art were regulated by the vigilant Ministry of Propaganda, under Joseph Goebbels. One of the Ministry's main tasks was to mobilize German anti-Semitism in support of Nazi persecution of German Jews, which would reach its climax in the Holocaust, begun in earnest in 1941. The persecution of the Jews was a major step in Hitler's plan to conquer all of Europe for the Aryan race, a plan that resulted in the outbreak of World War II.*

*There are many explanations for why Hitler was able to come to power in Germany. The first focuses on the evil genius of Hitler himself. He was a master of demagoguery, practicing his oratorical skills in front of the mirror for hours at a time. A skilled manipulator, he played the masses, the government, and the media perfectly, creating a party that reached into every aspect of German life. A second explanation contends that the German people were in a situation that made totalitarianism possible. Germans were deeply ashamed of their loss in World War One, and the German state was devastated by the war and the Treaty of Versailles, which mandated vast reparations payments. Soldiers returned from the war to rampant unemployment and general misery. The German people, with a history of anti-Semitism, found it much easier to blame the defeat on the Jews and socialists than themselves. Hitler provided this scapegoat, and claimed that if only the Germans could expel the Jews, the state could return to its past glory. The German state had a long tradition of authoritarian government, and many Germans associated the liberalization of that government with the outbreak of war, and more importantly, the devastation of the post-war period. Many sought a return to the old ways, believing that modern, liberal beliefs had sacrificed German honor and allowed the state to depreciate in the name of freedom. Hitler offered not freedom, but rather security. He promised to take action to improve the economy, and return German national pride, and the masses, in most cases, were happy to grant him the ultimate power he needed to do so.*

*Hitler's political program was a vague collection of promises that led each societal group to believe it would be the primary beneficiary of the Nazi government. He promised relief for the unemployed, protection of private property against the communist threat, profits for large businesses, and survival for small businesses. These promises addressed the most important reason for Hitler's ascent to power: the economic depression that wracked Germany during the inter-war years. This is demonstrated most clearly by the lack of growth in the Nazi Party between 1925 and 1928, a period of relative prosperity during which the Party actually lost three seats in the Reichstag. Luckily for Hitler, the 1930s brought depression to Germany, and one out of every two German families was affected by unemployment. As the leader of the frustrated and disillusioned, Hitler reaped the political benefits.*

*Hitler's consolidation of power mirrored Benito Mussolini's in many ways, as Hitler manipulated President Hindenburg into granting him legal dictatorial power, one step at a time, so as to legitimize the rise of the Third Reich. Hitler had used corruption and intimidation to get what he wanted, and he had gotten away with it, due in part to the legality of many of his actions under concessions made by Hindenburg.*

*Hitler's government was the ultimate example of totalitarianism. The swastika, it's symbol, could be seen all over Germany. Its ideology could be read in pamphlets, or in the newspaper every day. The Ministry of Propaganda exerted total control over the media, playing a large role in the production and direction of movies, and monitoring every image and thought shown or expressed to the German people, all the while gauging their response and adjusting the propaganda attack accordingly. During the twelve-year reign of the Third Reich, Germany had one police officer for every 155 citizens, serving as enforcers of the system of total control. The Nazi Party controlled and defined Germany, and was in turn controlled and defined by Hitler.*