

Adolf Hitler (German: [ˈaːdɔlf ˈhɪtlɐ] (listen); 20 April 1889 – 30 April 1945) was an Austrian-born German politician who was the dictator of Germany from 1933 until his suicide in 1945. He rose to power as the leader of the Nazi Party,[a] becoming the chancellor in 1933 and then taking the title of Führer und Reichskanzler in 1934.[b] During his dictatorship, he initiated World War II in Europe by invading Poland on 1 September 1939. He was closely involved in military operations throughout the war and was central to the perpetration of the Holocaust: the genocide of about six million Jews and millions of other victims.

Hitler was born in Braunau am Inn in Austria-Hungary and was raised near Linz. He lived in Vienna later in the first decade of the 1900s and moved to Germany in 1913. He was decorated during his service in the German Army in World War I. In 1919, he joined the German Workers' Party (DAP), the precursor of the Nazi Party, and was appointed leader of the Nazi Party in 1921. In 1923, he attempted to seize governmental power in a failed coup in Munich and was imprisoned with a sentence of five years. In jail, he dictated the first volume of his autobiography and political manifesto *Mein Kampf* ("My Struggle"). After his early release in 1924, Hitler gained popular support by attacking the Treaty of Versailles and promoting pan-Germanism, anti-Semitism and anti-communism with charismatic oratory and Nazi propaganda. He frequently denounced international capitalism and communism as part of a Jewish conspiracy.

By November 1932, the Nazi Party held the most seats in the German Reichstag but did not have a majority. As a result, no party was able to form a majority parliamentary coalition in support of a candidate for chancellor. The former chancellor Franz von Papen and other conservative leaders

persuaded President Paul von Hindenburg to appoint Hitler as chancellor on 30 January 1933. Shortly after, the Reichstag passed the Enabling Act of 1933 which began the process of transforming the Weimar Republic into Nazi Germany, a one-party dictatorship based on the totalitarian and autocratic ideology of Nazism. On 2 August 1934, Hindenburg died and Hitler replaced him as the head of state and government. Hitler aimed to eliminate Jews from Germany and establish a New Order to counter what he saw as the injustice of the post-World War I international order dominated by Britain and France. His first six years in power resulted in rapid economic recovery from the Great Depression, the abrogation of restrictions imposed on Germany after World War I, and the annexation of territories inhabited by millions of ethnic Germans, which initially gave him significant popular support.

Hitler sought *Lebensraum* (lit. 'living space') for the German people in Eastern Europe, and his aggressive foreign policy is considered the primary cause of World War II in Europe. He directed large-scale rearmament and, on 1 September 1939, invaded Poland, resulting in Britain and France declaring war on Germany. In June 1941, Hitler ordered an invasion of the Soviet Union. In December 1941, he declared war on the United States. By the end of 1941, German forces and the European Axis powers occupied most of Europe and North Africa. These gains were gradually reversed after 1941, and in 1945 the Allied armies defeated the German army. On 29 April 1945, he married his longtime partner, Eva Braun, in the Führerbunker in Berlin. Less than two days later, the couple committed suicide to avoid capture by the Soviet Red Army. Their corpses were burned as Hitler had commanded.

The historian and biographer Ian Kershaw describes Hitler as "the embodiment of

modern political evil".[4] Under Hitler's leadership and racist ideology, the Nazi regime was responsible for the genocide of about six million Jews and millions of other victims, whom he and his followers deemed Untermenschen (subhumans) or socially undesirable. Hitler and the Nazi regime were also responsible for the killing of an estimated 19.3 million civilians and prisoners of war. In addition, 28.7 million soldiers and civilians died as a result of military action in the European theatre. The number of civilians killed during World War II was unprecedented in warfare, and the casualties constitute the deadliest conflict in history.

Adolf Hitler was born on 20 April 1889 in Braunau am Inn, a town in Austria-Hungary (in present-day Austria), close to the border with the German Empire.[15][16] He was the fourth of six children born to Alois Hitler and his third wife, Klara Pölzl. Three of Hitler's siblings—Gustav, Ida, and Otto—died in infancy.[17] Also living in the household were Alois's children from his second marriage: Alois Jr. (born 1882) and Angela (born 1883).[18] When Hitler was three, the family moved to Passau, Germany.[19] There he acquired the distinctive lower Bavarian dialect, rather than Austrian German, which marked his speech throughout his life.[20][21][22] The family returned to Austria and settled in Leonding in 1894, and in June 1895 Alois retired to Hafeld, near Lambach, where he farmed and kept bees. Hitler attended Volksschule (a state-funded primary school) in nearby Fischlham.[23][24]

The move to Hafeld coincided with the onset of intense father-son conflicts caused by Hitler's refusal to conform to the strict discipline of his school.[25] His father beat him, although his mother tried to protect him.[26] Alois Hitler's farming efforts at Hafeld ended in failure, and in 1897 the family moved to Lambach. The eight-year-old Hitler took

singing lessons, sang in the church choir, and even considered becoming a priest.[27] In 1898 the family returned permanently to Leonding. Hitler was deeply affected by the death of his younger brother Edmund, who died in 1900 from measles. Hitler changed from a confident, outgoing, conscientious student to a morose, detached boy who constantly fought with his father and teachers.[28]

Alois had made a successful career in the customs bureau and wanted his son to follow in his footsteps.[29] Hitler later dramatised an episode from this period when his father took him to visit a customs office, depicting it as an event that gave rise to an unforgiving antagonism between father and son, who were both strong-willed.[30][31][32] Ignoring his son's desire to attend a classical high school and become an artist, Alois sent Hitler to the Realschule in Linz in September 1900.[c][33] Hitler rebelled against this decision, and in *Mein Kampf* states that he intentionally did poorly in school, hoping that once his father saw "what little progress I was making at the technical school he would let me devote myself to my dream".[34]

Like many Austrian Germans, Hitler began to develop German nationalist ideas from a young age.[35] He expressed loyalty only to Germany, despising the declining Habsburg monarchy and its rule over an ethnically variegated empire.[36][37] Hitler and his friends used the greeting "Heil", and sang the "Deutschlandlied" instead of the Austrian Imperial anthem.[38]

After Alois's sudden death on 3 January 1903, Hitler's performance at school deteriorated and his mother allowed him to leave.[39] He enrolled at the Realschule in Steyr in September 1904, where his behaviour and performance improved.[40] In 1905, after

passing a repeat of the final exam, Hitler left the school without any ambitions for further education or clear plans for a career.[41] In August 1914, at the outbreak of World War I, Hitler was living in Munich and voluntarily enlisted in the Bavarian Army.[66] According to a 1924 report by the Bavarian authorities, allowing Hitler to serve was almost certainly an administrative error, since as an Austrian citizen, he should have been returned to Austria.[66] Posted to the Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment 16 (1st Company of the List Regiment),[67][66] he served as a dispatch runner on the Western Front in France and Belgium,[68] spending nearly half his time at the regimental headquarters in Fournes-en-Weppes, well behind the front lines.[69][70] In 1914, he was present at the First Battle of Ypres[71] and in that year was decorated for bravery, receiving the Iron Cross, Second Class.[71]

During his service at headquarters, Hitler pursued his artwork, drawing cartoons and instructions for an army newspaper. During the Battle of the Somme in October 1916, he was wounded in the left thigh when a shell exploded in the dispatch runners' dugout.[72] [71] Hitler spent almost two months recovering in hospital at Beelitz, returning to his regiment on 5 March 1917.[73] He was present at the Battle of Arras of 1917 and the Battle of Passchendaele.[71] He received the Black Wound Badge on 18 May 1918[74] and in August 1918, on a recommendation by Lieutenant Hugo Gutmann, his Jewish superior, Hitler received the Iron Cross, First Class, a decoration rarely awarded to one of Hitler's Gefreiter rank.[75][76] On 15 October 1918, he was temporarily blinded in a mustard gas attack and was hospitalised in Pasewalk.[77] While there, Hitler learned of Germany's defeat, and – by his own account – upon receiving this news, suffered a second bout of blindness.[78]

Hitler described the war as "the greatest of all experiences", and was praised by his commanding officers for his bravery.[79] His wartime experience reinforced his German patriotism, and he was shocked by Germany's capitulation in November 1918.[80] His bitterness over the collapse of the war effort began to shape his ideology.[81] Like other German nationalists, he believed the Dolchstoßlegende (stab-in-the-back myth), which claimed that the German army, "undefeated in the field", had been "stabbed in the back" on the home front by civilian leaders, Jews, Marxists, and those who signed the armistice that ended the fighting—later dubbed the "November criminals".[82]

The Treaty of Versailles stipulated that Germany had to relinquish several of its territories and demilitarise the Rhineland. The treaty imposed economic sanctions and levied heavy reparations on the country. Many Germans saw the treaty as an unjust humiliation. They especially objected to Article 231, which they interpreted as declaring Germany responsible for the war.[83] The Versailles Treaty and the economic, social, and political conditions in Germany after the war were later exploited by Hitler for political gain.[84]

After World War I, Hitler returned to Munich.[85] Without formal education or career prospects, he remained in the army.[86] In July 1919 he was appointed Verbindungsmann (intelligence agent) of an Aufklärungskommando (reconnaissance unit) of the Reichswehr, assigned to influence other soldiers and to infiltrate the German Workers' Party (DAP). At a DAP meeting on 12 September 1919, Party Chairman Anton Drexler was impressed with Hitler's oratorical skills. He gave him a copy of his pamphlet *My Political Awakening*, which contained

anti-Semitic, nationalist, anti-capitalist, and anti-Marxist ideas.[87] On the orders of his army superiors, Hitler applied to join the party,[88] and within a week was accepted as party member 555 (the party began counting membership at 500 to give the impression they were a much larger party).[89][90]

Hitler made his earliest known written statement about the Jewish question in a 16 September 1919 letter to Adolf Gemlich (now known as the Gemlich letter). In the letter, Hitler argues that the aim of the government "must unshakably be the removal of the Jews altogether".[91]

At the DAP, Hitler met Dietrich Eckart, one of the party's founders and a member of the occult Thule Society.[92] Eckart became Hitler's mentor, exchanging ideas with him and introducing him to a wide range of Munich society.[93] To increase its appeal, the DAP changed its name to the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), known colloquially as the "Nazi Party").[94] Hitler designed the party's banner of a swastika in a white circle on a red background.[95]

Hitler was discharged from the army on 31 March 1920 and began working full-time for the party.[96] The party headquarters was in Munich, a hotbed of anti-government German nationalists determined to crush Marxism and undermine the Weimar Republic.[97] In February 1921—already highly effective at crowd manipulation—he spoke to a crowd of over 6,000.[98] To publicise the meeting, two truckloads of party supporters drove around Munich waving swastika flags and distributing leaflets. Hitler soon gained notoriety for his rowdy polemic speeches against the Treaty of Versailles, rival politicians, and especially against Marxists and Jews.[99] In June 1921,

while Hitler and Eckart were on a fundraising trip to Berlin, a mutiny broke out within the Nazi Party in Munich. Members of its executive committee wanted to merge with the Nuremberg-based German Socialist Party (DSP).[100] Hitler returned to Munich on 11 July and angrily tendered his resignation. The committee members realised that the resignation of their leading public figure and speaker would mean the end of the party.[101] Hitler announced he would rejoin on the condition that he would replace Drexler as party chairman, and that the party headquarters would remain in Munich.[102] The committee agreed, and he rejoined the party on 26 July as member 3,680. Hitler continued to face some opposition within the Nazi Party. Opponents of Hitler in the leadership had Hermann Esser expelled from the party, and they printed 3,000 copies of a pamphlet attacking Hitler as a traitor to the party.[102][d] In the following days, Hitler spoke to several packed houses and defended himself and Esser, to thunderous applause. His strategy proved successful, and at a special party congress on 29 July, he was granted absolute powers as party chairman, replacing Drexler, by a vote of 533 to 1.[103]

Hitler's vitriolic beer hall speeches began attracting regular audiences. A demagogue,[104] he became adept at using populist themes, including the use of scapegoats, who were blamed for his listeners' economic hardships.[105][106][107] Hitler used personal magnetism and an understanding of crowd psychology to his advantage while engaged in public speaking.[108][109] Historians have noted the hypnotic effect of his rhetoric on large audiences, and of his eyes in small groups.[110] Alfons Heck, a former member of the Hitler Youth, recalled:

We erupted into a frenzy of nationalistic pride that bordered on hysteria. For minutes on end, we shouted at the top of our lungs, with tears streaming down our faces: Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil! From that moment on, I belonged to Adolf Hitler body and soul.[111]

Early followers included Rudolf Hess, former air force ace Hermann Göring, and army captain Ernst Röhm. Röhm became head of the Nazis' paramilitary organisation, the Sturmabteilung (SA, "Stormtroopers"), which protected meetings and attacked political opponents. A critical influence on Hitler's thinking during this period was the Aufbau Vereinigung,[112] a conspiratorial group of White Russian exiles and early Nazis. The group, financed with funds channelled from wealthy industrialists, introduced Hitler to the idea of a Jewish conspiracy, linking international finance with Bolshevism.[113]

The programme of the Nazi Party was laid out in their 25-point programme on 24 February 1920. This did not represent a coherent ideology, but was a conglomeration of received ideas which had currency in the völkisch Pan-Germanic movement, such as ultranationalism, opposition to the Treaty of Versailles, distrust of capitalism, as well as some socialist ideas. For Hitler, though, the most important aspect of it was its strong anti-Semitic stance. He also perceived the programme as primarily a basis for propaganda and for attracting people to the party.[114]

In 1923, Hitler enlisted the help of World War I General Erich Ludendorff for an attempted coup known as the "Beer Hall Putsch". The Nazi Party used Italian Fascism as a model for their appearance and policies. Hitler wanted to emulate Benito Mussolini's "March on Rome" of 1922 by staging his own coup in Bavaria, to be followed by a challenge to the

government in Berlin. Hitler and Ludendorff sought the support of Staatskommissar (State Commissioner) Gustav Ritter von Kahr, Bavaria's de facto ruler. However, Kahr, along with Police Chief Hans Ritter von Seisser and Reichswehr General Otto von Lossow, wanted to install a nationalist dictatorship without Hitler.[115]

On 8 November 1923, Hitler and the SA stormed a public meeting of 3,000 people organised by Kahr in the Bürgerbräukeller, a beer hall in Munich. Interrupting Kahr's speech, he announced that the national revolution had begun and declared the formation of a new government with Ludendorff.[116] Retiring to a back room, Hitler, with handgun drawn, demanded and got the support of Kahr, Seisser, and Lossow.[116] Hitler's forces initially succeeded in occupying the local Reichswehr and police headquarters, but Kahr and his cohorts quickly withdrew their support. Neither the army, nor the state police, joined forces with Hitler.[117] The next day, Hitler and his followers marched from the beer hall to the Bavarian War Ministry to overthrow the Bavarian government, but police dispersed them.[118] Sixteen Nazi Party members and four police officers were killed in the failed coup.[119] Hitler fled to the home of Ernst Hanfstaengl and by some accounts contemplated suicide.[120] He was depressed but calm when arrested on 11 November 1923 for high treason.[121] His trial before the special People's Court in Munich began in February 1924,[122] and Alfred Rosenberg became temporary leader of the Nazi Party. On 1 April, Hitler was sentenced to five years' imprisonment at Landsberg Prison.[123] There, he received friendly treatment from the guards, and was allowed mail from supporters and regular visits by party comrades. Pardoned by the Bavarian Supreme Court, he was released from jail on 20

December 1924, against the state prosecutor's objections.[124] Including time on remand, Hitler served just over one year in prison.[125]

While at Landsberg, Hitler dictated most of the first volume of *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle; originally entitled *Four and a Half Years of Struggle against Lies, Stupidity, and Cowardice*) at first to his chauffeur, Emil Maurice, and then to his deputy, Rudolf Hess.[125][126] The book, dedicated to Thule Society member Dietrich Eckart, was an autobiography and exposition of his ideology. The book laid out Hitler's plans for transforming German society into one based on race. Throughout the book, Jews are equated with "germs" and presented as the "international poisoners" of society. According to Hitler's ideology, the only solution was their extermination. While Hitler did not describe exactly how this was to be accomplished, his "inherent genocidal thrust is undeniable", according to Ian Kershaw.[127]

Published in two volumes in 1925 and 1926, *Mein Kampf* sold 228,000 copies between 1925 and 1932. One million copies were sold in 1933, Hitler's first year in office.[128]

Shortly before Hitler was eligible for parole, the Bavarian government attempted to have him deported to Austria.[129] The Austrian federal chancellor rejected the request on the specious grounds that his service in the German Army made his Austrian citizenship void.[130] In response, Hitler formally renounced his Austrian citizenship on 7 April 1925.[130]