

The Holocaust was an appalling time in the history of the world. The person probably most associated with it is Adolph Hitler, the leader of Germany at the time. He used force, propaganda, and the current economic conditions to gain power. With that power, he created a totalitarian state. Millions of innocent people were needlessly killed and executed because of concentrated power in the hands of the few. Because of the strength of the militaristic society, it took a world war to end this event, along with German invasions of other territories. By studying what led up to the Holocaust, we can hopefully prevent a similar event from occurring in the future.

The future leader of Germany, Adolph Hitler, actually started out as a poor and unhappy child. Born on April 20, 1889, in Braunau-am-Inn, Austria, his father died when he was 14. Although he was not German nor pure Aryan, he thought of himself that way. A poor student, he blamed many of his teachers and dropped out of school at age 16. Hitler, who had a talent for painting, was rejected at an art academy at age 19. Afterwards, he was poor and homeless. He also read many books dealing with German philosophy, German history, and anti-Semitism (Resnick 13).

During this time period, Germany experienced many horrible economic conditions. The Treaty of Versailles (signed after World War I) greatly reduced the size of the military, forbid Germany from uniting with Austria, gave German land to other countries (Alsace-Lorraine was returned to France, Malmedy was given to Belgium, Posen and sections of Prussia were given to Poland, the Tyrol region was given to Italy, and the Sudenland border area was given to Czechoslovakia), and Danzig was made a free state. In addition to this, the Allies demanded reparations. About 38% of Germany's total capital was lost for payments, which was an average of 1,350 marks per person (Schlesinger, Jr. 40, 41). The Great Depression, as well, was responsible for Germany's economic conditions. Due to inflation, one mark before World War 1 was equal to one billion afterwards. Factories shut down, life savings were gone, and 6 million Germans were unemployed. Many more than that number were unable to buy food.

Hitler's involvement in politics started in Munich, where he went to political meetings of different groups planning to take control of the government. He took information learned there and relayed it to army officers who wanted government control, as well. In 1919, Hitler, while spying on members of the German Workers' party, decided that he agreed with their opinions. He joined the group as spokesman, due to his ability at public speaking.

Germans at the time wanted a leader who could get them out of the depression and Hitler was able to convince them that he could do it. Along with plans to stimulate the economy, he included his own ideas (Resnick 15, 16, 21). Hitler wanted *gleichschaltung* (complete uniformity) in Germany (Friedman 110). He blamed the poor economy on the Allied nations (Resnick 16) and said that Germany was unfairly defeated and "stabbed in the back" by Communists and Jews ("Holocaust Timeline"), whom he called the "evil partners" of the Allies. Many international bankers and merchants were Jews and Hitler claimed that they had sold Germany out to the enemies (Resnick 16). He also blamed Jews for the loss of German land (Altman 37). Hitler called Germans masters of the Aryan race (an Aryan is a white,

non-Jew and a pure Aryan appears Nordic or Scandinavian, has a long head, is tall, blonde, and has blue eyes). Because many Germans were Aryan, Hitler gave them pride and a feeling of superiority (Resnick 20). His first anti-Jew speech, "Why We are Against the Jews," on August 13, 1920, attracted a good amount of attention (Altman 40). Along with Jews and Communists, gypsy's, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, blacks, and Arabs were targeted (Friedman 7, 25, 47, 91).

In 1921, the Workers' Party became the Nazi Party (Resnick 16), (short for the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterparte [NSDAP] or National Socialist German Workers' Party) (<http://versaware.kidsreference.lycos.com>). Members consisted primarily of unemployed veterans and belligerent rogues. The party's symbol was the swastika, a design with four black bands pointing in four directions to symbolize the four corners of the world. The swastika was a symbol of world conquest and anti-Semitism. "One People, One Government, One Leader" was the Nazi slogan.

On November 8, 1923, Hitler tried to overthrow the government in what was called the Beer Hall Putsch. He failed, however, and was sent to jail, although his sentence was shortened considerably. During his sentence, Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), which told of his life and personal views (Resnick 16, 19, 22). After he was let out of prison on December 20, 1924, Hitler was, for a time, not allowed to make public speeches. However, his book became widespread and helped gain popularity for the Nazi Party. From 1926 to 1928, members of the Nazi party doubled from 50,000 to 100,000. The party continued to grow, and in the 1930 election, the party got 6 million votes (18%) and 107 members in the Reichstag (a type of parliament). In 1932, the party got 33.1% of the votes (Altman 46, 50).

Propaganda was one of the Nazi's main methods to gain power. Joseph Gobbels was employed as propaganda minister for Hitler. He was able to use mass media to encourage persecution and public support (Resnick 22). Nazi marches, flags, swastikas, and salutes (Altman 59, 60) were used not only to increase popularity, but also to make the party appear larger than it was and make people take it seriously (Schlesinger 41). Posters displaying Nazi pictures or slogans such as "Die Juden sind unser unglücklich" ("the Jews are our misfortune") were hung all over (Friedman 98). Hundreds of thousands entered the military and Aryan women were rewarded for having many children (Resnick 23). Teachers were forced to teach Nazi principles in schools and if they refused, they were fired (Friedman 97). Organizations such as the League of German Maidens and the National Socialist Women's Organization also encouraged Nazi support (Altman 46). Eight million boys ages ten to eighteen were forced to join the Hitler Youth Movement, in which members showed their support for the Nazi party and even spied on their parents and teachers. All communication was censored and only German culture was allowed in the media (Resnick 23, 24). Textbooks were rewritten to show Jews as sub-human, only certain types of art were displayed, and newspaper reporters were told what

to write without asking any questions (Friedman 97, 98). Books with Jewish authors, favoring Jews, or other “unfit” books were burned, often in large bonfires, and religious groups lost their freedom of speech (Resnick 25).

The Nazis often used force to get what they wanted and to stop such things as protests. They got rid of members who they thought might be disloyal to the party. The Sturmabteilung, or SA, (the members were called storm troopers or brownshirts) (Altman 40, 41), was often sent to break up meetings of Communists and other Nazi-opponents and also to convince the public of Nazi power. By 1923, the number of storm troopers was over 10,000. The Schutzstaffel (SS) was a security squad (Resnick 17, 27), and the Sicherheitsdienst (SD), established by Reinhard Heydrich, found dissenters in the Nazi party (Altman 63). Heinrich Himmler was in charge of the police and the Gestapo (secret police) (Resnick 22). The Gestapo targeted “enemies of the Reich” and could arrest anyone without questioning or following any laws (Altman 64). Members of this secret police banned protests, eliminated about one thousand dissenters, and beat, jailed, and tortured any opposition (Resnick 22).

In the 1930’s, Hitler’s power continued to increase. President Paul von Hindenburg, who narrowly defeated Hitler in the 1932 election, did not think it wise to appoint Hitler as Chancellor, as he was untrustworthy. Instead, Franz von Papen was appointed to the position. Papen wanted the support of the Nazis and offered to appoint Hitler to Vice Chancellor in return for their support. Hitler declined the offer, saying he would only offer support if he became Chancellor. The Nazi media and Nazi followers attacked Papen, forcing him to abdicate. His successor, Kurt von Schleicher, resigned on January 28, 1933, leaving Hitler with the position (Schlesinger 60, 61, 62, 63). On February 27, 1933, a fire destroyed the Reichstag building. Marinus van der Lubbe, a claimed Communist sympathizer, was accused. The Nazis jumped at the opportunity to say that Communists were overthrowing the government. The President signed a decree, which, along with many other parts, gave the Chancellor increased power and had many Communists and Socialist Democrats thrown in jail. On March 24, 1933, the Reichstag, with a two-thirds majority (Altman 52, 53) of 441 to 84, passed the Enabling Act (“Nazi Germany”), which gave the Chancellor the power to pass any law he wanted. The Nazis in the Reichstag supported it, along with Socialist Democrats (SPDs). The reason for their support was that they feared Communists and thought that, although he wasn’t great, Hitler wasn’t as bad as a Communist (Friedman 111).

As Chancellor, Hitler did many things and passed many laws to favor the Nazis. On April 1, 1933, Hitler declared a one-day, nationwide boycott of all Jewish businesses. Hitler banned Jews from any government employment seven days later. The Nazis also targeted labor unions. Hitler proclaimed a Day of National Labor, to celebrate “unity” between workers and the government. A rally was held on May 1, 1933, at which several hundred thousand workers attended. Its purpose was to increase German loyalty and to tell of the “dignity” of labor. One day later, The SS and SA arrested labor leaders, closed labor union offices, and stopped the labor press. Low-positioned workers were forced

to join the German Labor Front, agricultural organizations were replaced with the Reich Nutrition Estate, and the Chamber of Industry and Commerce was replaced by Estates of Trade and Handicraft. By doing this, the Nazis brought the power of big business into their group of supporters. On June 22, 1933, Socialist Democrats were removed from the Reichstag and the party was outlawed. By July 14, the Nazi party had become the only legal party in Germany. The same day, the Law for the Protection of Genetically Diseased Offspring (also called the Sterilization Law) was passed. It called for the sterilization of anyone with mental retardation, mental illness, brain disorders, blindness, deafness, and chronic alcoholism. Sterilizations often occurred unknown to victims and occasionally, sterilizing chemicals were injected during medical appointments.

By 1934, Ernst Roehm (head of the SA) wanted the SA to completely control the German army. Hitler still depended on the support of the normal army, and, therefore, was forced to limit the SA's power. On June 30, 1934, Hitler ordered SS members to murder or execute SA members without a trial. On what was called the "Night of Long Knives" at least one hundred members died.

On August 2, 1934, President Paul von Hindenburg died. Hitler combined the offices of chancellor and president so he was able to command the Wehrmacht (all of Germany's armed forces) as well as keep the position of Chancellor (Altman 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 71, 72).

On September 15, 1935, a set of laws that restricted the rights of Jews was passed. In these Nurnberg Laws, newborn Jews were forced to have ID cards with the letter J (for Jude) and wear stars. The middle name for all boys had to be Israel, and, for all females, the name had to be Sarah (Resnick 28). The Law for the Protection of German Blood prohibited intermarriage of Jews and non-Jews. Also, non-Jews who were able to have children could not work as domestic servants for Jews and Jews could not display the flag. On November 14, 1935, Jews lost their citizenship, which included their right to hold public office and their right to vote.

Hitler continued to use his power and soon began to invade other European nations. This brought about World War II, in which millions died, and near its end, Hitler killed himself before he was captured. The Nazis used economic conditions, persuasiveness, propaganda, a fear of Communism, and force to gain power. With power, Hitler tried to establish a German empire, along with persecuting entire races of people. We need to understand how this came about so that we can make sure it does not happen again.

"Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

-John Lord Acton, 1887 (Altman 66, 70)

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