

HOW DID **HITLER** HAPPEN?

Seventy-five years ago, the German dictator sparked World War II. How did he come to power—and could another Hitler rise up?



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At the Nazis' massive rallies, Hitler whipped German pride into a frenzy.

In the predawn darkness of September 1, 1939, the most destructive war ever fought was ignited with a fury.

All along the border with Poland, German artillery roared to life. Two thousand German tanks, 1.5 million soldiers, and 1,000 planes poured across the border. For Poland, resistance to the Germans' sudden, overwhelming attack—called *blitzkrieg* or “lightning war”—proved futile.

German Führer (leader) Adolf Hitler insisted that the Poles had persecuted Germans and fired the first shots. “We will pay them back, bomb by bomb!” he declared that morning to the Reichstag (parliament) in Berlin.

“*Sieg heil!*” (“Hail victory!”) Hitler’s audience roared with approval. Finally, they thought, Germany could recover its pride and take revenge on its enemies.

Hitler’s accusations about Poland were lies. His attack was simply the latest move in a campaign of aggression that would leave Germany in control of most of Europe (see map). It also started what historian Ian Kershaw calls “the greatest explosion of . . . violence the world has yet known”—World War II (1939-45).

The conflict that eventually consumed the planet pitted the Axis Powers—led by Germany, Japan, and Italy—against the Allies—led by the United States,



the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union. (The U.S. entered the war in December 1941.) As many as 50 million people died in World War II. About 6 million of them were Jews, murdered in Germany’s mass slaughter called the Holocaust.

Now, on the 75th anniversary of the start of World War II, historians are still wrestling with how the man most responsible for these horrors came to power. And they ask: Could it happen again?

A Raw Wound

“Hitler wouldn’t have happened,” says historian Peter Black, “without **World War I** and its aftermath.” Some 8.5 million soldiers were killed in the Great War, as Europeans called it then—

about 2 million of them Germans.

For Germans, World War I ended in defeat and “national humiliation,” says Black, a historian at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Germany was forced to sign the Treaty of Versailles (*vehr-SIGH*), which stripped away much of its military might. The Germans also had to pay billions in reparations (payment for the cost of war), a debt that was paid in monthly installments. “Every month the same raw wound was opened again,” Black tells *JS*.

The whole country was in an uproar. The economy was in a constant state of crisis. At times, German currency was so worthless that people needed a suitcase full of paper bills to buy even a loaf of bread. Matters got even worse during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when as many as 40 percent of Germans were out of work.

From this chaos, Hitler emerged. Starting in 1921, he headed a

Words to Know

- **World War I** (*n*): (1914-18) a conflict between the Central Powers, led by Germany, and the Allies, led by the U.K., the U.S., and France

- **propaganda** (*n*): ideas of an often false or exaggerated nature spread in media and speeches to help or attack a cause

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new, angry political party—the Nazis. The Nazis believed that Germany had not really lost World War I, but instead had been betrayed by “internal enemies.” A charismatic speaker, Hitler attracted growing crowds by attacking those enemies. The worst, he said, were Germany’s Jews, who he claimed were an inferior people that threatened the “purity” of the German race.

“It cannot be that 2 million Germans should have fallen in vain,” Hitler declared. “We demand vengeance!”

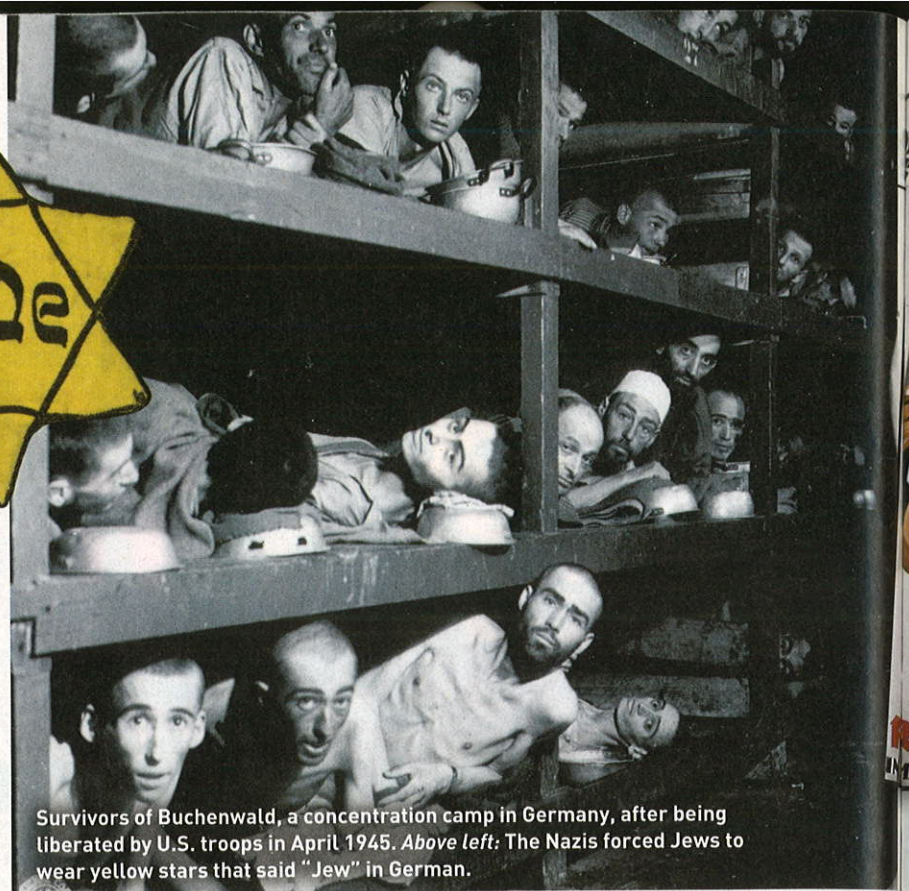
Through a series of elections, the Nazis steadily gained support in Germany. Even so, they never gained a majority of seats in the Reichstag. But in January 1933, during a severe government crisis, President Paul von Hindenburg needed the Nazis’ support. Fatefully, he offered Hitler the role of chancellor, Germany’s second-highest office.

“Hindenburg’s closest counselors thought they could control the Nazis while [using] their popularity,” says Black. “It was probably the most costly miscalculation of the 20th century.”

Hitler’s Spell

Now Hitler had real power. A month after he took office, the Reichstag building burned down. Blaming the fire on Communists, Hitler convinced Hindenburg to pass an emergency law suspending free speech and other civil liberties. Nazi opponents were rounded up in mass arrests.

Then in August 1934, Hindenburg died. Hitler became



Survivors of Buchenwald, a concentration camp in Germany, after being liberated by U.S. troops in April 1945. Above left: The Nazis forced Jews to wear yellow stars that said “Jew” in German.

head of the armed forces, the supreme commander—the Führer.

Quickly, the Nazis worked to gain wider support among the German people. They cleaned up street crime and put the nation back to work—in part by rebuilding the army, a direct violation of the Versailles Treaty. Germans who seethed with resentment over the treaty felt some of their old pride.

Nazi **propaganda** also skillfully sold Hitler as a symbol of “true Germanic virtues” like courage and “manliness,” Kershaw writes. The Nazis’ massive public rallies whipped people into a frenzy.

“There was only one thing for me,” said a German who had just heard Hitler speak, “to win with Adolf Hitler or to die for him. The personality of the Führer had me totally in its spell!”

Ignoring the Versailles Treaty, Hitler acted boldly to extend German might. In 1938, Germany

took over Austria, then claimed a region of Czechoslovakia where Hitler said Germans were being persecuted. Britain and France, seeking to avoid war, didn’t intervene. Soon, German armies had seized the whole country.

But when Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, Britain and France knew they had to act. Two days later, they declared war.

Still, Germans were proud. Hitler had lifted their country “from a defeated and humiliated nation to a great power,” Black says. Now they were ready to wipe out the shame of the last war with a new one. “This time they had to do it right.”

Another Hitler?

Once in power, the Nazis systematically stripped German Jews of their property and freedom. War allowed the Nazis to implement what their leaders called the “Final