

Reading 5B

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ADOLF HITLER

Adolf Hitler was born in Braunau, Austria. His mother seems to have been a kind woman. His strict father was an Austrian government worker. Hitler was almost constantly fighting with his father. Against his father's wishes, he went to Vienna as a young man to study art. He was refused entrance into an art school. Impoverished, he became one of Vienna's unemployed eking out a living painting post cards. Living in a flop-house, a cheap men's hotel, in Vienna, he began to listen to street corner anti-Semitic speakers. He later said he learned "the truth about the international Jew" in Vienna.

Hitler enlisted in the German army when World War I broke out and claimed, in his autobiographical *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), that he was astonished to discover that Germany had lost the war in 1918. After World War I, unemployed again, he moved to Germany where he joined the newly-formed German Workers Party in 1920. After Hitler failed to seize the government of Bavaria, a state in Southern Germany, in 1923, it seemed as if his political career was over. Nevertheless, turning to legal methods of gaining political power, Hitler worked behind the scenes to rebuild his party. In the 1925 presidential elections, Hitler convinced the World War I commanding general, Erich von Ludendorff, to run on the Nazi ticket. The Nazis failed miserably as Hindenburg was elected with an overwhelming majority. In 1932, Hitler himself ran for president. Although he was defeated by Hindenburg, Hitler received over 36 percent of the popular vote, more than thirteen million votes.

For many reasons, Hitler's support had grown between 1925 and 1932. He was among the first to employ modern techniques for election campaigns. His use of fast cars and airplanes allowed him to speak to thousands of people each day. His professional propagandists and film makers used radio and film to create an image of *Der Fuehrer*, The Leader, as confident, strong and concerned. He was unmatched as a public speaker and took great pride in his ability to manipulate and intimidate people. In the end, it was not what Hitler said to crowds of thousands that mattered but how he said it. Slogans and carefully staged meetings and rallies gave the county the impression that he could do no wrong and knew exactly what Germany needed.

In 1933, President von Hindenburg and his political advisors perceived Hitler as an uneducated gutter politician. Yet, they believed that only Hitler could bring a stop to the violence in the streets often caused by Nazi Brown Shirts (SA men). Convinced that he would be able to control Hitler, Hindenburg appointed him chancellor on January 30, 1933. Hitler was 44 years old.

By March 1933, it was clear that Hindenburg had been seriously mistaken about controlling Hitler. The chancellor used a variety of methods to gain total power and govern Germany as a dictator. He manipulated the mass media. He invented a Communist conspiracy which he claimed was directed at domination Germany. In order

to save the country from this Communist threat, he said, the civil rights guaranteed by the Weimar Constitution had to be eliminated. Even Hindenburg seemed to believe in the conspiracy theory.

The President allowed Hitler to replace the constitution with a series of emergency decrees. One of the most sweeping was the Enabling Act. This act gave Hitler the right to govern Germany by passing laws without the approval of the *Reichstag* (Parliament). Based on such emergency decrees, he shut down newspapers, radio stations, trade unions and opposition political parties. He also had government agencies write laws that began to remove Jews from German society and from the economy.

Under Hitler's rule, Germany seemed to be regaining prestige. In accordance with the Versailles Treaty, some of the territory lost after World War I was returned to Germany. Hitler strengthened the army in spite of the Versailles Treaty which had limited the German armed forces. Arms industries helped pull Germany out of the depression, and unemployment was reduced drastically. Other countries seemed to support Hitler whom they saw as a defense against Communism and the Soviet Union. It seemed that his promise of "law and order" was being kept. The police were everywhere, and it was safe for most Germans to walk the streets at night.

All those thought to hold anti-Nazi opinions, however, or Jews or those suspected of not supporting the Nazi government were subject to arrest and/or beatings. People were taken from their homes or off the streets to the newly opened concentration camps. They might be kept there for years without any news of their whereabouts being sent to their families. Upon release, they were made to swear they would remain silent about their experiences in the camp under the threat of being rearrested along with their families. Few were willing to break that promise knowing their families might be endangered.

Hitler believed that to maintain power his philosophy had to be aimed at Germany's young people. In December 1936, he passed the "Law Concerning the Hitler Youth." Under that law, all young people in Germany had to join Hitler Youth. Article 2 of the law stated the "the entire German youth is to be educated physically, mentally and morally in the Hitler Youth in the spirit of National Socialism." Young people now owed their allegiance first and foremost to their Fuehrer, Hitler, even if it meant abandoning their families, traditions, religion and friends. Germany would be "united in its youth."

By 1938, Hitler boasted that Germany would become an empire that would rule Europe for 1000 years. At first, his success was astonishing. For example, with no resistance, German-speaking Austria became part of the Third Reich, Hitler's "Third Empire," in 1938. A half-million Austrians greeted their new leader with joyous cries of "Heil Hitler!" as he rode triumphantly through the streets of Vienna.

Obsessed with obtaining *Lebensraum* (living space), Hitler led Germany into World War II and destruction. Because of his fanatical desire to create an "Aryan" Europe for Germans, he ordered what one historian has called "the war against the Jews," the attempted genocide of all Europe's Jews. World War II was to gain space for the

Germans; the war against the Jews was to guarantee “purity of race.” These were two wars. They were related because they happened on the same territory at the same time, but they were two separate issues in Hitler’s mind.

Hitler was a powerful, clever and ruthless politician. He totally dominated Germany and then most of Europe during World War II. Hitler promised the German people glory and prosperity. His promises were offered in empty slogans and phrases that masked lies or irrational arguments. Yet, because of his magnetic style, many people accepted those slogans and phrases without thinking. Hitler could not have caused the Holocaust or World War II by himself, but neither of those events could have occurred without him. By 1945, he was responsible for the death of nearly 6 million Jews and an estimated 40 million more men, women, and children.

Hitler committed suicide in May 1945, as the Soviet Army approached his underground bunker in Berlin.