

# HOW DID **HITLER** HAPPEN?

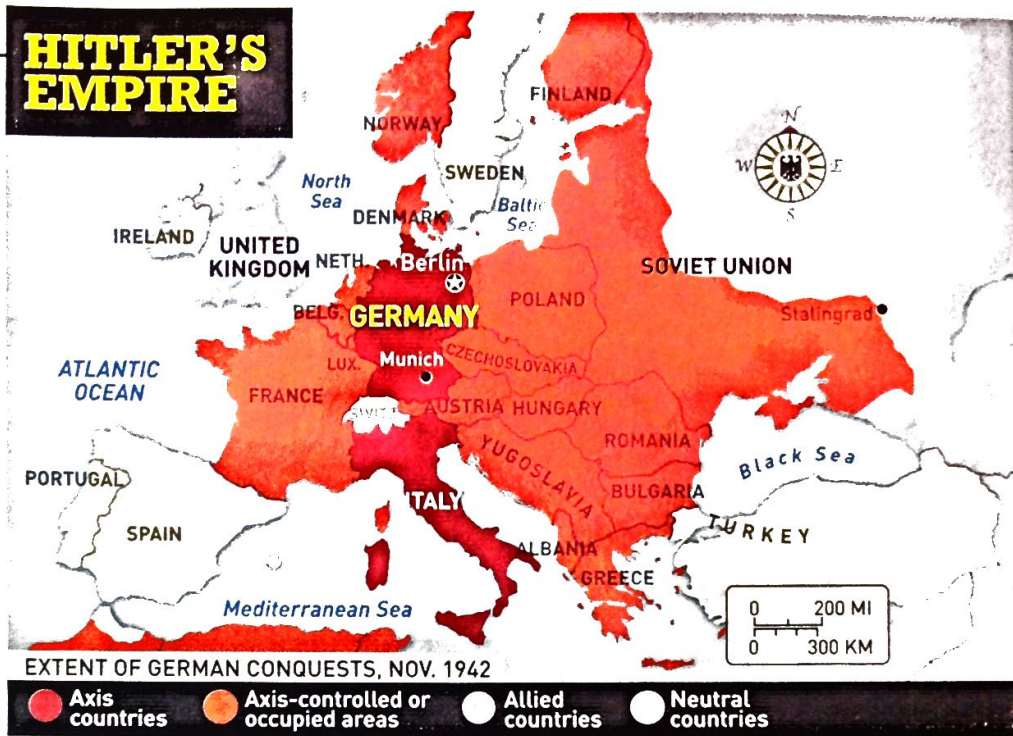
Seventy-five years ago, the German dictator sparked World War II. How did he come to power—and could another Hitler rise up?

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

## HITLER'S EMPIRE



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

continued on p. 16

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

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

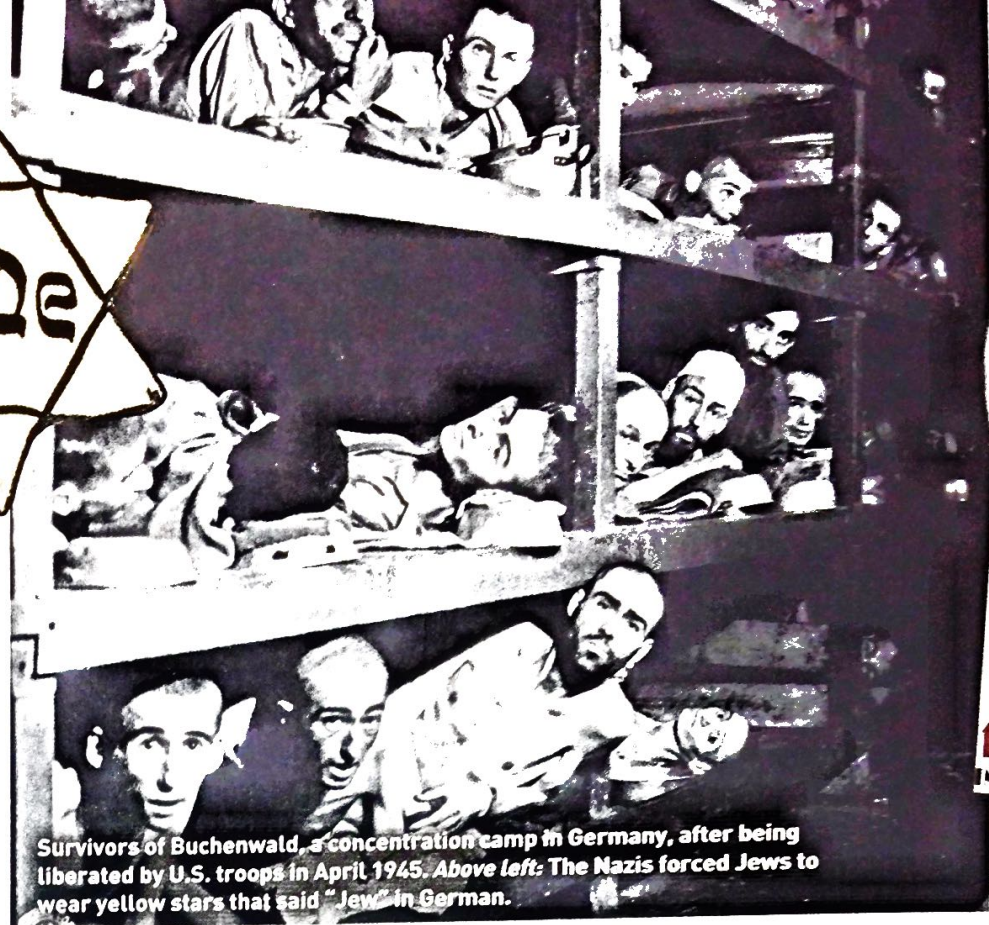
took over Austria, then claimed a region of Czechoslovakia where Hitler said Germans were being persecuted. Britain and France, seeking to avoid war, didn’t intervene. Soon, German armies had seized the whole country.

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



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.



In Nazi propaganda, like this poster, racially "pure" German youths fought for the Führer.\*

\* TRANSLATION: "The German Student Fights for the Führer and the People."

1942-43, Germany's attack on the Soviet Union was stopped at Stalingrad. Hitler had reached too far.

It took two more years to defeat Germany. In April 1945, as the Allies closed in on his underground bunker in Berlin, Hitler killed himself. One week later, his generals surrendered. (The war finally ended four months later, when the Allies defeated Japan.)

Decades later, experts debate the question: Could Hitler happen again? When Russian President Vladimir Putin seized the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine this year, he said he'd done it to protect ethnic Russians—as Hitler claimed about Germans in Czechoslovakia. Dictators continue to plague the world with mass executions, as Cambodian ruler Pol Pot did when he killed more than 1 million of his own people in the 1970s.

Yet many historians believe that it would be hard to re-create the specific conditions that led to the Nazis' rise. "What happened in Germany in 1933, and its aftermath, will remain a uniquely terrible episode in history," Kershaw writes.

Black agrees. All the same, he admits, "Before the First World War, one could not have foreseen" the forces that brought the Nazis to power. He points to the chaos resulting from the civil war in Syria (see pp. 8-13).

"We have no way of predicting what is going to come out of it," Black says. In the same way, there is no way to know if the world will ever see another Adolf Hitler.

—Bryan Brown

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Nearly every country was caught up in World War II. About 298,000 Americans died in the conflict.

Solution" to "the Jewish problem." Throughout Germany and the countries that it occupied, the Nazis put into place a machinery to wipe out the Jewish people. With a highly efficient system of mobile killing squads, train lines, and concentration camps, millions of Jews were shot, gassed, or worked or starved to death. Other groups considered inferior, such as Roma (gypsies), the disabled, and gays were also persecuted and murdered in the Holocaust.

At the start of the war, Hitler's military gambles paid off in a string of victories. But in time the tide turned against him. In December 1941, after Japan attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, the U.S. joined the Allies. Then in the winter of

# 5 ways the war changed the U.S.

**1** The U.S. became a superpower. American leadership during the war gave the U.S. a dominant role around the globe after it ended in 1945.

**2** U.S. factories, which churned out goods for the war effort, created millions of jobs and helped to finally end the Great Depression.

**3** While men were off fighting, more than 6 million women entered the work force. Many stopped working after the war. But the



seeds of change had been planted. Women are about 57 percent of today's work force.

**4** In 1944, Congress passed the G.I. Bill, which helped millions of veterans go to college—making higher education a common goal for Americans.

**5** More than 900,000 African-Americans enlisted in the military during WWII. After fighting for freedom overseas, blacks demanded their own at home—leading to the civil rights era. In 1948, President Harry Truman desegregated all U.S. forces.

