[](http://www.holocaust-history.org/short-essays/adolf-hitler-photo.shtml)**Who was Adolf Hitler?**

Adolf Hitler was the Führer (Leader) of Nazi Germany, the instigator of World War II and the driving force behind the attempt to exterminate European Jewry, otherwise known as the Final Solution or the Holocaust. 3

Hitler was born in Braunau am Inn, in Austria, on April 20, 1889, the third son of Alois and Klara Hitler. The family moved around a lot, including to Linz, Leonding and other places. Hitler did well in school at the beginning, but his marks got progressively worse as time went on. His father died when he was 14, his mother when he was 18. He tried twice to enter the Academy for Art in Vienna, but was rejected both times. Between 1909 and 1913, he lived in Vienna. There is controversy as to whether he was destitute there. He moved to Munich (Germany) in 1913, and was still there when World War I broke out in August 1914.

Hitler enlisted in the German army and saw four years of front-line service during which he was wounded several times and decorated for bravery twice. He was gassed near the end of the war. During this time, he served as an intelligence agent for the military authorities, in the course of which he attended a meeting of the tiny German Workers Party in 1919. He later joined the party, became its leader and changed its name to the National Socialist German Workers Party, later called the Nazi Party. In 1920, the 25 Points of the Nazi Party were proclaimed, one of which called for the removal of the Jews from German society.

The Nazis tried to seize power by force in November 1923 (called the Beer Hall Putsch), but were thwarted by the Munich police. Hitler was convicted of high treason and sentences to prison, where he served about a year. During that time, he began to write *Mein Kampf* ("My Struggle"), which later became the second Bible in Nazi Germany. Hitler resolved to achieve power legally, and after a series of events too numerous to detail here, was appointed Chancellor of Germany by President von Hindenburg on January 30, 1933.

Over the next 6 years, Hitler undertook a series of measures designed to rid Germany of its obligations under the Treaty of Versailles (imposed on Germany after World War I), restore the economy which had been devastated by the Great Depression, rearm the country, and acquire *Lebensraum* ("living space") for Germany. In *Mein Kampf*, he had written of the need for this "living space" which he said could only be acquired at the expense of countries to the east, notably Russia. In 1938, by a series of intrigues, Germany annexed Austria and the Sudeten portion of Czechoslovakia, and, in 1939, occupied the remainder of Czechoslovakia.

During this time, Hitler implemented a series of measures designed to eliminate the Jews from German life. Among these were gradual exclusion from most spheres of professional activity, rules as to where they could live, prohibition of marriage and other relations between Germans and Jews, economic sanctions and many others. Jews were harassed, attacked, beaten and otherwise persecuted. Many were incarcerated in concentration camps under "protective custody" orders which were tantamount to indefinite imprisonment. There they were beaten, abused and frequently murdered.

World War II began in September 1939 with the German attack on Poland. By mid-1940, Germany had conquered Poland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, and France, and had Britain at its mercy. At this time, Hitler began to think about attacking the Soviet Union, with which he had concluded a non-aggression pact just before the outbreak of the war. His motivation was both to acquire the "living space" he had talked about in "Mein Kampf" and to exterminate Communism, which he saw intertwined with Jewry. The attack took place in June 1941.

It was roughly at this time that Hitler ordered the extermination of the Jews, which the Nazis called *die Endlösung* ("the Final Solution"). There is some debate as to exactly when the order was given (since no written order has been found), but most experts place it in mid- to late-1941. It most likely was an evolving process.

In any event, concurrent with the invasion of the Soviet Union, [Einsatzgruppen](http://www.holocaust-history.org/intro-einsatz/) under the overall direction of Heinrich Himmler, Leader of the SS, followed the German Army into the Soviet Union and began to shoot Jews - men, women and children - where they were found. Starting in late 1941 and early 1942, stationary killing centers were set up in various locations, where Jews were gassed with hydrogen cyanide or carbon monoxide. By the end of the war, approximately 6 million Jews had been shot, gassed, or worked to death.

The fortunes of war turned irrevocably against Germany at the end of 1942 and it was all downhill from then until the end of the war in 1945. Nonetheless, the killing of the Jews continued right up to the final days. With Soviet forces approaching the underground bunker in Berlin where he had been holed up since early 1945, Hitler committed suicide.

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