

THE YEAR
1939

Could Hitler Happen Again?

The German dictator was responsible for the Holocaust and World War II, which began 75 years ago this month. How did he come to power—and could another Hitler emerge? BY DAVID BROWN



The same determination was never brought to bear in the postwar decades of 1945. It was along the border with Poland, across anarchy and chaos, that the Wehrmacht German took 1.1 million soldiers and 1,000 planes poured across the border to Poland, including in the German tank corps—called *Blitzkrieg* or “lightning war”—and a panzer.

German Hitler (and) Adolf Hitler believed that the Poles had persecuted Germans and had lost the first war. “We will get them back, head to head!” he declared that morning to the cheering (and) cheering crowd.

“Yes, yes!” (I’ll never!) Hitler’s audience roared in approval. They believed the message—especially when it came to the end of the war.

Hitler’s accusations against Poland

► To learn more about the Holocaust, visit a video at www.ushahimuseum.com.

Could Hitler Happen Again?

The German dictator was responsible for the Holocaust and World War II, which began 75 years ago this month. How did he come to power—and could another Hitler emerge? BY BRYAN BROWN




The most destructive war ever fought began in the predawn darkness of Sept. 1, 1939. All along the border with Poland, German artillery suddenly roared to life. Two thousand German tanks, 1.5 million soldiers, and 1,000 planes poured across the border. For Poland, resistance to the German invasion—called *blitzkrieg* or “lightning war”—would prove futile.

German *Führer* (leader) Adolf Hitler insisted that the Poles had persecuted Germans and had 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 in approval. They believed that Germany could finally recover its pride and avenge its enemies.

Hitler’s accusations against Poland

 To learn more about the Holocaust, watch a video at www.upfrontmagazine.com.



Hitler giving a radio address, 1934 (left); a Nazi Party rally that year in Nuremberg, Germany

were lies. And his attack would ignite what historian Ian Kershaw calls “the greatest explosion of bloodletting and violence the world has yet known”—World War II (1939-45).

Within months, German troops would overwhelm Poland, Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France. By November 1942, much of Europe (see map, p. 20) and parts of North Africa had fallen.

World War II became a global conflict that pitted the Axis Powers—led by Germany, Japan, and Italy—against the Allies—led by the U.S., the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union. (The U.S. entered the war in December 1941.) It resulted in the deaths of up to 50 million people. About 6 million of the dead were Jews, murdered in the Germans’ mass slaughter known as the Holocaust.

On the 75th anniversary of the start of World War II, historians are still wrestling with how the man most responsible for two of history’s greatest

horrors came to have so much power. And they ask: Could it happen again?

A ‘Costly Miscalculation’

According to historian Peter Black, Hitler wouldn’t have risen to power if not for World War I (1914-18) and its aftermath. Some 16 million people, including civilians, were killed in the Great War, as it was then called—about 2 million of them German soldiers.

For the defeated Germans, the war ended in national humiliation. Germany was forced to sign the Treaty of Versailles, which stripped the nation of much of its military might. It also had to pay billions in reparations to the Allies in monthly installments. “Every month the same raw wound was opened again,” says Black, of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM).

All of German society was in an uproar. The economy collapsed. At times, German currency was so worthless that people had to carry paper bills in suitcases to buy the most basic items. During the

Great Depression of the 1930s, up to 40 percent of the people were out of work. At the same time the country’s new democratic government couldn’t control the many extremist groups that spread violence in the streets.

Hitler emerged from this chaos. In 1921, he began leading a new political party—the National Socialist German Workers’ Party, or Nazis for short. A charismatic speaker, Hitler drew increasingly large crowds by insisting that Germany lost World War I only because it had been betrayed by “internal enemies.”

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

Foremost among the “enemies” Hitler singled out were Germany’s Jews, who made up less than 1 percent of its population. He said they were racially inferior and threatened the “purity” of German blood. Hitler’s rhetoric steadily gained support during a series of elections.

Hitler’s party never won a majority of seats in the Reichstag. But in

January 1933, during a government crisis, President Paul von Hindenburg needed the Nazis' support. Fatefully, he appointed Hitler chancellor (similar to a prime minister).

"Hindenburg's closest counselors thought they could control the Nazis while at the same time exploiting their popularity," says Black. "It was probably the most costly miscalculation of the 20th century."

The Holocaust

Less than a month after becoming chancellor, Hitler used a fire at the Reichstag building as an excuse to get an emergency decree passed that suspended 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.

The Nazis attracted wider support among Germans by making ambitious promises and delivering on them. They cleaned up street crime. Then they got the nation back to work, in part by rebuilding the army—a direct violation of the Versailles Treaty. Still seething with resentment over the treaty, Germans regained some of their old pride.

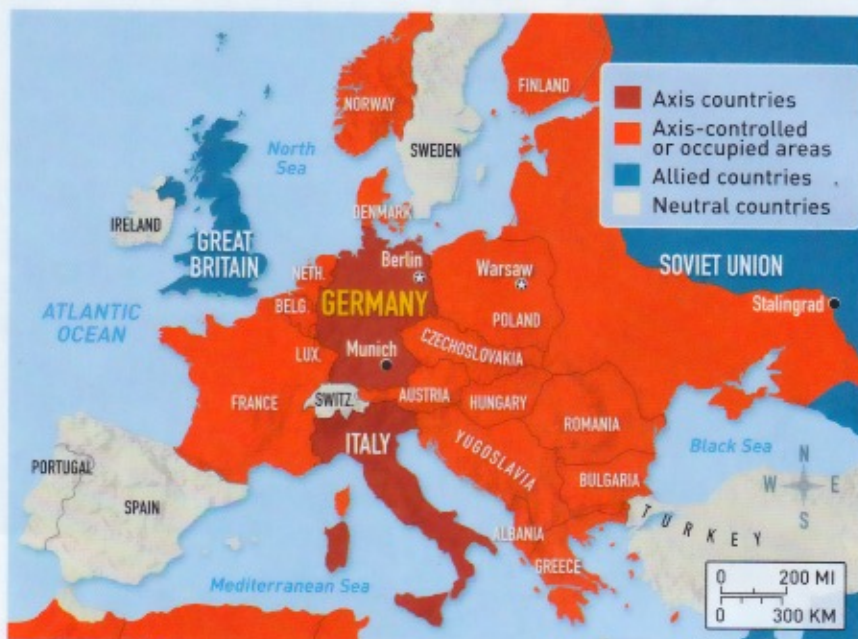
Nazi propaganda also skillfully promoted Hitler as the symbol of "true Germanic virtues [of] courage, manliness, integrity," Kershaw writes. The Nazis' massive, highly choreographed rallies (see photo, p. 18) whipped up support for Hitler into a frenzy.

"There was only one thing for me," said one German after hearing Hitler speak. "To win with Adolf Hitler or to die for him. The personality of the Führer had me totally in its spell."

After essentially ripping up the Versailles Treaty, Hitler set his sights on the rest of Europe. In 1938, Germany took over neighboring Austria. Then it claimed a region of Czechoslovakia called the Sudetenland, where, Hitler said, Germans were being persecuted. Britain and France, seeking to avoid war by appeasing Hitler, agreed to let Germany have it. Within months, German armies had seized all of Czechoslovakia.

Conquering Europe

Germany and other Axis countries controlled much of the continent in 1942



But with Germany's invasion of Poland on Sept. 1, 1939, the Allies realized they had to act. On September 3, Britain and France declared war.

To most Germans, however, Hitler had lifted their country "from a defeated and humiliated nation to a great power," Black says. They were ready to wipe out the shame of the last war. "This time," he says, "they had to do it right."

As soon as Hitler became chancellor in 1933, the Nazi government began systematically stripping German Jews of their property, citizenship, and freedom. The war allowed the Nazi regime to

implement what they called the "Final Solution" to "the Jewish problem." Throughout Germany and the countries that it occupied, elite Nazi SS soldiers and the Gestapo (secret police) put the plan into practice. Their frighteningly efficient system of train lines, death camps, and gas chambers sent millions of Jews and other "undesirables," such as gypsies and gays, to their deaths.

Did Germans try to resist? Pete Fredlake of the USHMM says most were persuaded to aid the Nazis—or at least turn a blind eye to their crimes. Fredlake sums up their thoughts: "I have a job now.

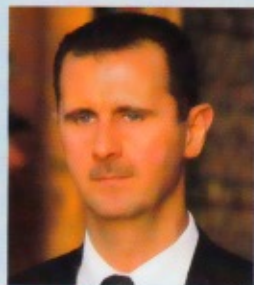


Jews surrender to German soldiers after an uprising at the Warsaw Ghetto in Poland, 1943.

PHOTO: DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS; MAP: JIM MCMAHON/MAPMAN; OPPOSITE PAGE: MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE/TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES (BOTTOM); TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: LOUIS BERSHAR/PHOTOFESTY IMAGES; ED. JONES/PHOTOFESTY IMAGES; © HOBARD BURDITT/REUTERS/CORBIS; SASHA MURDOVETS/GETTY IMAGES; GREGORIO BORGIA/AP PHOTO

Rogues Gallery

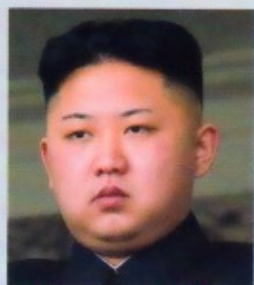
How do some of today's despots and autocrats compare with Hitler?



Bashar al-Assad

SYRIA

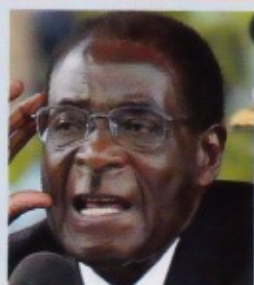
The Assad regime has kidnapped, tortured, and executed its enemies, and used chemical weapons on civilians during the civil war that began as an Arab Spring uprising in 2011. At least 160,000 Syrians have been killed, and millions more have been displaced.



Kim Jong Un

NORTH KOREA

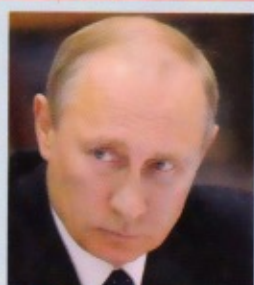
Kim has put more than 200,000 North Koreans, including children, into labor camps, according to Human Rights Watch; they're tortured, starved, and attacked by dogs if they get out of line. He has ruthlessly ruled his one-party state since the death of his father in 2011.



Robert Mugabe

ZIMBABWE

The 90-year-old Mugabe has used intimidation, violence, and murder to cling to power he's held since 1980 and to punish his political opponents. Mugabe has also threatened to behead gay people, saying they're "worse than dogs and pigs."



Vladimir Putin

RUSSIA

President Putin alarmed the world earlier this year when he seized the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine. In power since 1999 as either prime minister or president, Putin has cracked down on freedom of speech, the press, and the rights of opponents to protest.



Omar Hassan al-Bashir

SUDAN

Bashir is wanted by the International Criminal Court for genocide. In 2003, when non-Arabs in Darfur demanded more rights from the Arab Sudanese government, Bashir's militiamen burned Darfur's villages and murdered and raped its people. About 400,000 have been killed, and the violence is ongoing.

Look at the new roads the government is building. I have a new apartment"—even if it had been taken from Jews. Gradually, Germans let the worst happen.

Another Hitler?

At the beginning of the war, Hitler's bold military gambles paid off in a string of victories. But two things helped turn the tide against him. First, the U.S. entered the war on the Allies' side after Germany's ally Japan attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on Dec. 7, 1941. Second, in the winter of 1942-43, Hitler

reached too far in trying to conquer Russia (just as Napoleon had before him) and the German advance was stopped at Stalingrad.

It took two more years to defeat Germany. Finally, in April 1945, as the Allies closed in on his underground bunker in Berlin, Hitler killed himself; his generals surrendered a week later. The U.S. kept fighting in the Pacific until Japan officially surrendered in September 1945.

The world has never gotten over Hitler's genocide. To this day, experts debate whether Hitler could happen again.

There have certainly been atrocities

since Hitler's reign. During the 1970s, the regime of Cambodian dictator Pol Pot killed more than 1 million people through execution, starvation, and disease. More recently, North Korea's dictator, Kim Jong Un, has been accused of imprisoning, starving, and torturing his people (*see box*).

Yet many historians say it would take a perfect storm for another monster like Hitler to emerge—including desperate economic conditions, a leader convinced that an ethnic or a political group threatened national survival, and a demoralized people willing to follow. "What happened in Germany in 1933, and its aftermath, will remain a uniquely terrible episode in history," Kershaw writes.

Black cautiously agrees, adding that "before the First World War, one could not have foreseen" the many forces that brought the Nazis to power. He points to the civil war in Syria and wonders what might happen as that country comes apart (*see p. 8*).

"We have no way of predicting what is going to come out of it," he says—or when or if the world will ever see another Adolf Hitler. •



Survivors of the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany are liberated by U.S. forces, 1945.