

HITLER'S RISE AND FALL

(Appendix 2 to Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

World War I and the Treaty of Versailles. On June 28, 1914, Gavrilo Princip, a Serbian nationalist, assassinated the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, Archduke Francis Ferdinand,¹ in the streets of Sarajevo. Princip was part of a conspiracy involving six other Serbian nationalists (whom the Serbian government had trained and assisted, although that was not discovered at the time). A month later, Austria-Hungary, confident of backing from Germany, declared war on Serbia. Serbia's allies, Russia and France, mobilized for war. Germany quickly did the same, and her subsequent violation of Belgian neutrality—the easiest invasion route into France—brought Britain into the War on the side of France and the Allied powers. In November 1914, the Ottoman Empire joined Germany and Austria-Hungary to complete the Central powers.

Germany was ill-suited to the war of attrition that the Western Front quickly became, for the Allies had far greater resources of both men and material. Britain's Royal Navy closed the sea lanes, which seriously reduced German commerce. Germany also chose her allies poorly. Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire were militarily incompetent, and therefore offered little help in the fight. Germany's defeat of Russia in 1917 was more than counter-balanced by the entry of the United States on the side of the Allies that same year. The Ottomans capitulated on October 30, 1918, and Austria-Hungary did the same four days later. By then, Germany was exhausted, starving, and bankrupt. With their armies retreating in the field, and revolution brewing at home, Germany's leaders sought an armistice. The Allies demanded that Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicate, which he dutifully did on November 9th. The fighting ended two days later. For Germany, losing the war hurt, but the peace would prove devastating.

At the 1919 peace conference, the Allies excluded the former Central powers. The Treaty of Versailles was a peace dictated by the victors, and its terms were harsh, designed to punish Germany and keep her from regaining her former military and economic power. It only succeeded in causing another war 20 years later. The terms included: (1) Germany lost 27,000 square miles of European territory and 6.5 million inhabitants, including Alsace-Lorraine in the west and Posen, upper Silesia, and the Danzig corridor in the east, along with all of her colonies in Africa and Asia; (2) Germany's army became little more than a police

¹ Archduke Francis Ferdinand was the nephew of the Austrian Emperor Francis Joseph. The Archduke's wife of 14 years, the former Countess Sophie Chotek, was also shot and killed.

force, being limited to 100,000 men, without tanks, airplanes, or heavy weapons; (3) Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire ceased to exist,² and the new country of Austria was forbidden to unite with Germany; (4) the Allies would occupy the west bank of the Rhine for 15 years, with Germany required to pay the costs of the occupation; (5) the east bank of the Rhine would be demilitarized to a distance of 30 miles; and (6) Germany had to accept sole responsibility for the War and pay crippling reparations. At the insistence of United States President Woodrow Wilson, the Treaty created the League of Nations, but Germany was excluded from it until 1926.

The Allies revealed the terms of the Treaty in May 1919, causing general outrage among the people of Germany. But the Allies continued their blockade even after the War ended, and this reduced Germany to desperation. The leaders of the new democratic German government had no choice but to sign, which they did on June 28th.

Hitler and the Beer Hall Putsch. The end of the War brought chaos in Germany. Left-wing revolts erupted, such as the “Spartacus revolt” in Berlin in January 1919, the Munich Soviet Republic in April 1919, and the Communist revolt in the Ruhr in March 1920. These were suppressed by the army, with the help of the *Freikorps* (“Free Corps”), a right-wing paramilitary group. A right-wing revolt—the “Kapp Putsch”—broke out in March 1920, but it failed as well.

Meanwhile, Germany’s economic woes began to multiply in 1921. In April of that year the Allies presented Germany with the bill for War reparations: 132 billion gold marks, or \$33 billion, which had to be paid in foreign currency. It was an impossible amount, and caused runaway inflation in Germany. The ratio of German marks to American dollars, which had been seven-and-a-half to one at the end of the War, was seventy-five to one in 1921, 400 to 1 in 1922, and 7,000 to 1 by the beginning of 1923. When Germany inevitably defaulted on its reparations payments, French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr in January 1923, and German inflation skyrocketed. The ratio of marks to dollars reached one million to one by August, and four billion to one by November. Germans’ lifetime savings were wiped out, and debtors happily repaid their debts with worthless paper. A story is told of a lady who left a basket full of German marks for a few minutes, and returned to find that a thief had dumped out the money and stolen the basket.

² Austria-Hungary was divided among Italy, Romania, and four new countries—Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia. The Ottoman Empire was similarly split. Turkey remained, but France and England assumed control of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine.

The German middle class was ruined. Many sold valuable possessions for a fraction of their value, merely to survive.³

Most Germans despised their government for signing the Treaty of Versailles, and both left- and right-wing groups proliferated. One such right-wing group, calling itself the German Workers Party, had its beginnings in Munich in January 1919. In 1920, the party changed its name to the National Socialist German Workers Party—or Nazis, for short.⁴ On September 16, 1919, this party recruited its most famous member, Adolf Hitler—a dynamic speaker who blamed Germany’s woes on an imaginary conspiracy among the Jews and the Communists, which to him were all one. This message played well among the down-trodden, and the party grew rapidly. In July 1921, Hitler became the party’s absolute leader. The Nazi party platform called for the exclusion of Jews from German citizenship. The Nazis also advocated what they called “positive Christianity”—i.e., Christianity in line with the Nazis’ racist views and values.

Violence quickly became an accepted political tactic. Many political parties on the left and the right had their own paramilitary forces. In October 1921, the Nazis formed the *Sturmabteilung* (“Storm Section”), or S.A. for short, whose purpose was to protect Nazi meetings and to disrupt the meetings of rival parties. Later Hitler set up a protective body guard for himself: the *Schutzstaffeln* (“Protection Squad”), commonly known by its acronym, “S.S.”

Fortunately for Hitler and the Nazis, sympathetic government officials in Munich usually treated right-wing violence with considerable lenience.⁵ For example, after the S.A. beat up the leader of the Bavarian League in September 1921, Hitler spent a mere five weeks in jail. And for his treasonous attempt to seize power in November 1923—commonly known as the “Beer Hall Putsch” because it was centered in Munich’s Buergerbräukeller beer hall—he received a five-year sentence and was released on parole in December 1924.

The Beer Hall Putsch, though unsuccessful, produced a windfall for Hitler. The trial made him famous and won him adoring fans throughout Germany. On April 1, 1924, when his sentence was to be announced, women crowded the courtroom, attempting to shower Hitler with flowers. Meanwhile, he used his time in prison to write the first volume of his autobiographical book, *Mein Kampf* (“My

³ The Bonhoeffers survived this hyperinflation primarily because Karl Bonhoeffer had many foreign patients, who paid him in their own currency.

⁴ In German, the party’s name was *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*. It was also known by its initials, the N.S.D.A.P.

⁵ Left-wing violence was usually treated much more harshly than right-wing violence in conservative areas such as Munich.

Struggle”), which set forth his racist political views in great candor. More importantly, the failed Putsch convinced Hitler that he must pursue political power through legitimate means—that is, through elections. So he emerged from Landsberg prison determined to remake the Nazis into a powerful political force, by unifying the party behind his leadership and broadening its base of support.

Hitler Rising. Inflation had been brought under control by the beginning of 1924, and the German economy began to revive, financed largely by loans from the United States. But this all changed on October 24, 1929 when the Wall Street stock market crash ushered in the Great Depression. Loans from the United States suddenly dried up, exports slowed, and the German economy collapsed. By 1930 the unemployment rate in Germany had reached 30%.

The Nazis blamed this misery on democracy, the Communists, and the Jews. Their message of patriotism, economic prosperity, and strong leadership won over many suffering Germans. The Nazis’ success reflected the rising nationalism and anti-Semitism in Germany during the 1920s and early 1930s. Right-wing parties like the Nazis associated democracy with “western decadence.” Many Germans agreed. They feared the Communists (much like Americans did during the 1950s), and resented the Jews who had recently immigrated from the east and were not yet assimilated (much like many Americans resent Mexican immigrants today). The Nazis gained votes and money by playing upon these fears and resentments. In an election on September 24, 1930, the Nazis won 107 of 485 seats in the Reichstag (the German legislature). Only the German Social Democratic Party, ⁶ with 143 seats, had more.

In early 1932, Hitler ran for president against the reigning president and German hero of World War I, Paul von Beneckendorf und von Hindenburg. In March, Hitler won enough votes to deny Hindenburg a clear majority and force a run-off. Hitler gained ground in the April run-off, but still fell short of victory. This momentary set-back was more than offset by the election of July 31, 1932, which saw the Nazis win 230 seats in the Reichstag, making them the largest single party in the German legislature.

Hindenburg’s victory led him to ban the S.A. and S.S. on April 14th because of the violence they were promoting, but Hitler’s growing popularity ensured that the ban would not last for long. He was able to get it lifted on June 15th, in exchange for promises to end the violence and to support the new chancellor, Franz von Papen. Of course, Hitler did neither. He instead encouraged his supporters to engage in violence in an effort to intimidate his opponents—

⁶ In German, the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*.

especially the Communists. On July 10th street battles between the Nazis and the Communists killed eighteen police officers. A week later, 19 people died and 285 were wounded on what was called the Bloody Sunday of Altona.

Hitler in Power. Franz von Papen lasted less than four months as German Chancellor before the Reichstag, led by the Nazis, voted him out of office. A new election on November 6, 1932 saw the Nazis lose 34 seats. Although they still maintained their position as Germany's leading party, this set-back delayed Hitler's accession to power temporarily. But two months later, after another failed Chancellor (General Kurt von Schleicher), everyone was ready to give Hitler and the Nazis their chance. Hitler became Chancellor on January 30, 1933. A month later he seized an opportunity to grab the power he craved.

On February 27th, the Reichstag building erupted in flames. The police quickly arrested a Dutch Communist, Marinus van der Lubbe, for the crime.⁷ The Nazis—whom many outside Germany suspected of setting the fire themselves—greatly exaggerated the incident to stir up fears of a Communist revolution. The result was the “Reich President's Edict for the Protection of People and State”—more commonly known as the Reichstag Fire Decree. This new law suspended civil liberties, including free speech, freedom of the press, freedom to peaceably assemble, privacy of communications, and protections against government searches, seizures of property, and arrests.

Hitler used this new power to arrest or muzzle his opponents in preparation for the last election in Germany until after 1945. With the police now under Nazi control, the S.S. and the S.A. could intimidate opponents with impunity. Even so, on March 5, 1933, the Nazis won only 44% of the popular vote and 288 seats in the Reichstag, a few seats short of a majority, and well short of the two-thirds Hitler needed to achieve his ambition of becoming a dictator. But on March 23rd, the Nazis' friends and allies in the Reichstag joined in passing the “Law for Removing the Distress of People and Reich,” better known as the Enabling Act.⁸ This law gave Hitler all of the Reichstag's legislative powers for four years, including the

⁷ Dietrich's father, Karl Bonhoeffer, examined van der Lubbe for evidence of mental illness, and found none. Van der Lubbe was eventually executed. Several Communist Party leaders were also tried for the crime and were acquitted.

⁸ The vote was 441 in favor of the Enabling Act, and only 94 against. It was supported by the Catholic Center Party, the Bavarian People's Party, and the German National People's Party, in addition to the Nazis. Only the Social Democrats opposed it. For this, the Social Democratic Party was banned in June 1933 and many of its leaders sent to concentration camps. (The German Communist Party members took no part in the vote since they had been expelled from the Reichstag by this time.)

authority to make laws that were inconsistent with the constitution. Hitler promised to exercise this power with discretion and restraint, and only so long as necessary. Actually, he used it to jail thousands of his opponents, outlaw opposition, and further limit freedom in Germany. And he never relinquished that power.

Two days before passage of the Enabling Act, the Reichstag passed the “Decree for the Defense Against Treasonous Attacks on the Government of the National Uprising,” better known as the Malicious Practices Act, which made it a crime to criticize Hitler, the German government, Nazi leaders, or the Nazi party. At the same time, the Reichstag set up *Sondergericht*, or “Special Courts,” to try political crimes in an atmosphere which promoted Nazi interests at the expense of justice, and which allowed for no appeal. A year later, Hitler established the “People’s Court” to try cases of treason, again with no right of appeal. March 1933 also saw the establishment of Dachau concentration camp,⁹ one of 50 such camps set up during the year to detain, control, and sometimes murder Nazi opponents.

On May 2nd, the Nazis destroyed the labor unions, and replaced them with the German Labor Front. Since membership in the German Labor Front was generally mandatory if a person wanted to work, the Nazis thereby controlled the livelihood of most Germans. In January 1934, the “Law on Working Conditions” gave the Nazis control over wages and labor policies, too. On May 10, 1933, they sponsored a book burning in Berlin, Heidelberg, Tübingen, and many other German cities, focusing primarily on books by Jewish authors. 20,000 books were burned in Berlin alone.

For Hitler, power was the greatest virtue, and weakness the most grievous sin. So on July 14, 1933, he enacted the “Law on Hereditary Health,” which authorized the forced sterilization of those he considered weak—alcoholics, Communists, the “feeble-minded,” Blacks, gypsies, the “abnormal,” and the unproductive. On June 30, 1934 Hitler eliminated one of the last remaining threats to his power when he ordered the murder of the leaders of the S.A. The S.S. killed as many as 200 people in this “Night of the Long Knives,” and arrested many more. From that point forward, the brutal and fiercely loyal S.S., run by Heinrich Himmler, replaced the S.A. as Hitler’s attack dog.

Discrimination Against the Jews. In April 1933, Hitler began his campaign against the Jews by declaring a boycott of all Jewish businesses. It was a spectacular failure. Hitler ended the boycott after only two days due to widespread domestic and foreign criticism. Much more effective were a series of laws designed to deprive Jews of their economic livelihood and exclude them from

⁹ Dachau is located about ten miles north of Munich.

German culture. In April 1933, the “Law Against the Overcrowding of German Schools” limited Jewish students to a mere 1.5% of a school’s total enrollment. Laws later that year prohibited Jews from getting into radio, journalism, theater, films, farming, and teaching. By the end of 1933, the Nazis had barred Jews from entering government service and the legal profession, and placed severe restrictions on Jewish doctors and dentists. However, most of these anti-Jewish laws allowed Jews to remain in the jobs they already had, so as to minimize disruption to the economy; absolute exclusion would come a few years later. One exception was the military, which discharged all Jews in February 1934.

September 1935 saw the issuance of the infamous “Nuremberg Laws,” which deprived Jews of German citizenship, forbid marriage between Jews and Aryans, and prohibited German women under age 45 from working in Jewish homes. However, September also brought a temporary respite for the Jews, when Hitler ordered that anti-Semitic activity be curtailed in preparation for the Berlin Olympics in August 1936.

Hitler as Absolute Dictator. When President Hindenberg died on August 2, 1934, Hitler assumed both the title and powers of the President, and finally achieved his goal of becoming absolute dictator of Germany. As one of his first orders, he required all members of the German military to swear an oath of loyalty to him personally.¹⁰ In February 1936 Hitler exempted the police arm of the Nazis, the Gestapo,¹¹ from judicial review, placing it, like himself, above the law. Two months later he greatly expanded the reach of the Nazi-controlled People’s Court, granting it authority to try offenses involving spying, destruction of military property, demoralization of the troops, and giving aid and comfort to the enemy. And in June 1936, Hitler placed the Gestapo and all other police forces under the authority of Himmler and the S.S.

While thus increasing and securing his power at home, Hitler began to distance himself from the hated Versailles Treaty in preparation for a war he alone knew was inevitable. In October 1934 he ordered the German military increased from 100,000 to 300,000 men. In March 1935 he ordered universal military service—i.e., a peacetime draft—and increased the size of the military to 500,000. In March 1936 the German army occupied the demilitarized Rhineland and began

¹⁰ The oath was as follows: “I swear before God to give my unconditional obedience to Adolf Hitler, Führer of the Reich and its people, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, and I pledge my word as a brave soldier to observe this oath always even at the risk of my life.”

¹¹ Gestapo is from the German, *Geheime Staatspolizei*, meaning “Secret State Police.” It was originally established in Prussia by Hermann Göring in April 1933.

construction of the West Wall—defensive fortifications along the border with France. In each case, France and Great Britain did nothing. Thus emboldened, Hitler finally renounced the Versailles Treaty on January 30, 1937.

Despite the loss of personal freedoms and privacy, Hitler was extremely popular in Germany, and not merely because of his side-stepping of the Versailles Treaty. In four short years, he had revived the economy and lowered unemployment, reduced infant mortality and the prevalence of many diseases, and begun construction of the Autobahn and production of the Volkswagen. He also carefully crafted his public image as that of a humble man of the people and arch enemy of Bolshevism. To many Germans who were not being persecuted by the Nazis, Hitler seemed like the ideal leader.

Nazi Oppression Worsens. After the Berlin Olympics ended on August 16, 1936, Nazi oppression of the Jews steadily worsened. In October, Hitler enacted a law to prohibit them from tutoring Aryans. In April 1937 he barred Jews from obtaining a medical degree. In December 1937, Hitler ordered a national boycott of Jewish businesses, then quickly followed this up with laws that were so discriminatory against “Jewish businesses” that most large companies removed Jews from their board of directors and all supervisory positions.¹² July 1938 saw laws prohibiting Jewish doctors from practicing medicine, and a similar law in September 1938 forbid Jewish lawyers from practicing law.

The summer of 1938 also saw the implementation of compulsory Aryanization laws, which required Jews to sell their businesses to Aryans, often at fire-sale prices, and with the government taking a cut of the sale proceeds. In December these compulsory Aryanization laws were extended to all Jewish-owned property. In combination with earlier laws which excluded Jews from the government and the military, these laws deprived most Jews of their means of support. The Nazis also set about depriving them of their dignity and their security.

In May 1938, Nazi party members, encouraged and assisted by the S.S. and the police, began a campaign of systematic violence against Jews. This escalated a month later into arrests, torture, and threats. A law that took effect on January 1, 1939 required all Jewish passports to include the name “Israel” or “Sarah,” making it easy to identify Jewish travelers.

In October 1938, Germany forcibly deported 17,000 Jews to Poland with no advance warning. Many died of malnutrition or exposure during the winter since

¹² In December 1937 Jewish businesses were restricted in the amount of foreign exchange and raw materials they could hold, making it difficult to engage in foreign trade or manufacturing. Then in February 1938 Jewish businesses became ineligible for government contracts.

they were forced to leave with few possessions. Two of the Polish Jews who suffered this injustice were the parents of Herschel Grynszpan, a 17-year-old Jew who decided to exact revenge upon the Germans. So on November 7, 1938, Herschel murdered Ernst vom Rath, a German Embassy official in Paris. Two days later this murder became the excuse for one of the most violent and destructive of the anti-Semitic pogroms in 1930s Germany: *Kristallnacht*, or “Crystal Night,” so named because of all the broken glass. Nazi party members and their supporters killed dozens of Jews, arrested thousands, and destroyed hundreds of Jewish synagogues, homes, and businesses. Police and the S.S. had orders not to interfere—and they often joined in—while firemen were forbidden to extinguish the fires, except to the extent necessary to keep them from spreading to Aryan homes and businesses. Afterward, the Nazi government confiscated insurance payments owed to Jewish business owners, imposed a huge fine on the Jews to help pay for the damages, and ensured the acquittal of those accused of murdering Jews.

Two events in 1939 foreshadowed the Nazis’ treatment of the Jews during World War II. The first was a speech by Hitler, delivered on January 30th, in which he warned that a world war would mean the destruction of the Jews in Europe. Few took Hitler’s threat seriously at the time. Then on April 30th, the “Law Regarding the Rental Conditions of the Jews” forced the Jews into Jewish-only apartments, facilitating their later deportation to concentration camps, ghettos, and ultimately, death camps.

Few Germans were left untouched by the Nazis’ tentacles, including children. On December 1, 1936, Hitler abolished all youth organizations and merged them into the Hitler Youth—a clear violation of his Concordat with the Roman Catholic Church in July 1933, which had guaranteed the freedom and inviolability of Catholic churches and organizations in Germany. Fifteen months later, membership in the Hitler Youth became compulsory for children beginning at age ten.

Hitler did not tolerate opposition to his policies. In January 1937, he ordered the dismissal of “politically unreliable” persons (a euphemism for Nazi opponents) from government service. Even at the highest levels of government, opposition to Hitler could end a career. In January 1938 he dismissed two of his highest ranking generals—Field Marshal Werner von Blomberg (Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces) and Colonel General Baron Werner von Fritsch (Commander-in-Chief of the Army)—for expressing opposition to his plan to launch an aggressive

war in the east to gain *lebensraum* (“living space”) for the German people.¹³ General Walther von Brauchitsch replaced Fritsch as commander of the Army, but Hitler made himself Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces in place of Blomberg.¹⁴ Hitler also fired his Economics Minister, Hjalmar Schacht, in November 1937 because of his opposition to Nazi anti-Semitism (for economic reasons). Fourteen months later Hitler also dismissed Schacht as president of the Reichsbank for criticizing Hitler’s military rearmament spending. In May 1940, Hitler dismissed General Johannes Blaskowitz as Commander of the German army in the East due to his opposition to Nazi atrocities in occupied Poland.

Nazi Atrocities During World War II. On September 1, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland. Two days later, Britain and France declared war. Using a combination of air power, tanks, and mobile troops known as *Blitzkrieg*, the German army overwhelmed Poland in only five weeks. Not far behind the German soldiers came five *Einsatzgruppen* (Special Groups), which murdered Polish intelligentsia, clergy, and nobility, and expelled 1.2 million Poles from their homes to make room for Germans.¹⁵ Many of these Poles would perish in the subsequent winter.¹⁶

War gave Hitler the excuse to rid himself of those he deemed unproductive, such as the mentally and physically handicapped. Thus, in October 1939 he ordered Operation T4 (also known as the T4 program).¹⁷ Operation T4 called for

¹³ The pretext for Fritsch’s dismissal was a trumped-up charge of homosexual relations with two Hitler youth and a prostitute, based on severely flawed evidence assembled by S.S. Deputy Director Reinhold Heydrich. After Fritsch’s dismissal, Reich Minister of Justice Franz Gürtner assigned Hans von Dohnanyi to investigate the matter further. In the course of this investigation, Dohnanyi would meet several future members of the conspiracy against Hitler, including Dr. Karl Sack, Colonel Hans Oster, and General Ludwig Beck.

¹⁴ Hitler also replaced the War Ministry with the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, or OKW—the High Command of the Armed Forces. Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel became Hitler’s Chief of Staff.

¹⁵ Hitler placed Heinrich Himmler in charge of the *Reichskommission für die Festigung des Deutschen Volkstums* (“Reich Commissariat for the Strengthening of German Nationhood”), or R.K.F.D.V., whose job it was to displace Poles to make room for German immigrants.

¹⁶ Some Nazi leaders, including Alfred Rosenberg (Minister for the Eastern Territories) and his assistant Georg Liebbrandt, strongly opposed the *Einsatzgruppen* because they saw that the Germans were turning potential allies into enemies. But Rosenberg and others like him were overruled by Himmler, Martin Bormann (chief of the Nazi party, and later Hitler’s personal secretary), Erich Koch (Reich commissar for the Ukraine), and ultimately Hitler himself.

¹⁷ The T4 program got its name from the address of its headquarters: 4 Tiergarten Strasse in Berlin.

the euthanasia of handicapped persons at six “hospitals” in Germany. Victims were asphyxiated with carbon monoxide gas and their bodies cremated, after which their families received death certificates with a fabricated cause of death. The Nazis murdered more than 70,000 persons before Hitler ended the program in August 1941. The T4 program turned out to be a dress rehearsal for Hitler’s “Final Solution”—the extermination of the Jews in Europe—which he ordered in about July 1941.

Not long after the conquest of Poland, Hitler ordered the S.S. to deport German Jews to the larger Polish cities, in preparation for their eventual extermination. To make identifying the Jews easier, the Nazis required them to wear a yellow star on their clothing, beginning in September 1941. And of course, the German government confiscated any of their remaining valuables before deporting them. Ironically, such deportations during the winter of 1941-1942 diverted many trains that were desperately needed for transporting winter clothing to German soldiers who were freezing to death on the Russian front. After the Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942,¹⁸ the deportations were expanded to include not only German Jews, but all European Jews.¹⁹

In the spring of 1940, the Germans established ghettos for the Jews in major Polish cities, such as Lodz, Warsaw, Krakow, Lublin, and Radom. These ghettos were walled-off or fenced-off areas of the city which the Jews were forbidden to leave, on pain of death. The ghetto-dwellers lacked sufficient food, heat, and medical care, and were often used as slave labor.²⁰ Most of the survivors were eventually either murdered or sent to one of six Nazi death camps.

¹⁸ The Wannsee Conference was so named because it took place at the Reich Security Main Office, at 56-58 Grossen Wannsee, in Berlin. This meeting, presided over by Reinhold Heydrich, Himmler’s number two man in the S.S., brought together many government and Nazi party leaders to discuss implementation of the Final Solution. Heydrich died in Prague on June 4, 1942, as a result of injuries sustained when his car was bombed by two members of the Czech resistance.

¹⁹ Not all European nations cooperated with the deportation of the Jews. Denmark sent all of its Jews to Sweden. Finland refused to give up its Jews. And Hungary resisted until March 1944, when German troops occupied the country.

²⁰ *Hitler’s Shadow War*, pp. 147-148, provides the following chilling example of the dehumanization of ghetto residents by the Germans:

The Nazi leisure organization, Strength through Joy (*Kraft durch Freude*), organized bus tours of Germans to the Warsaw ghetto. When the busses took German soldiers through the streets, the passengers acted like it was a visit to the zoo to see the animals. They laughed at the emaciated and suffering ghetto dwellers, and often lashed out at them with long whips. At the ghetto cemetery the

The Germans built the first such death camp at Auschwitz, in southwest Poland, in May 1940. However, in 1941 the Nazis added Birkenau (also known as Auschwitz II), which was the main extermination camp at Auschwitz. Beginning in September 1941, they murdered Auschwitz's victims using Zyklon B gas—a form of hydrogen cyanide routinely used as a pesticide. When Birkenau's largest gas chambers and crematoria became fully operational in 1943, the camp could murder and dispose of 2,500 persons a day. The Germans constructed five other death camps in late 1941: Treblinka in northern Poland; ²¹ Belzec in southeast Poland; Sobibor in eastern Poland; ²² Chelmno in western Poland, near Lodz; and Maidanek in central Poland near Lublin. All told, the six death camps murdered approximately five- to six-million people during the war, the vast majority of them Jews.

On December 7, 1941—the same day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor—Hitler issued the “Night and Fog” decree. Under this order, enemies of the State who were not immediately executed were to simply “vanish” without a trace. Of course, most were executed, but their families were told nothing about their fate—no death certificate, no grave marker, and no information about where, when, or how they perished, or where they might be buried.

Hitler's Zenith. Germany followed up the rapid defeat of Poland with conquests of Denmark and Norway in April 1940; Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg in May 1940; France in June 1940; Greece and Yugoslavia in April 1941; and Crete in May 1941. Meanwhile, Italy, Finland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Rumania joined the war on Germany's side, leaving Hitler in possession of most of Europe. ²³

After the fall of France, and for more than a year, only the British Empire stood against Hitler's tyranny. On June 18, 1940, the day after France sought an armistice with Germany, the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, famously urged the British people to stand firm: “Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will say, ‘This was their finest hour.’ ” Germany

visitors interrupted funerals and forced the families of the dead and the rabbis to pose for photographs.

²¹ When the Nazis closed Treblinka in August 1943, the residents revolted for fear of being murdered. Only 60 out of 1,000 survived the subsequent carnage.

²² Only 50 of the prisoners at Sobibor survived the war.

²³ Several European nations remained neutral during the War, including Spain, Switzerland, and Sweden.

unsuccessfully attempted to bring Britain to her knees through air power and bombs, while Britain ignored all of Hitler's peace overtures. So Hitler began to turn his attention to the East, where his true ambitions had always been centered.

Hitler's Critical Mistake. On June 22, 1941, Hitler launched the invasion of the Soviet Union, confident that he would achieve a swift victory and seize most of European Russia for German expansion.²⁴ However, after tremendous initial advances, the Germans were stopped in late 1941 by a combination of Soviet persistence, fresh troops from Siberia, and a particularly cruel Russian winter.²⁵ The failure to quickly defeat the Soviets left Germany locked in a death match against a nation with vastly superior manpower and resources.

Ironically, Hitler's savage tactics probably squandered his best chance for victory over the Soviets.²⁶ The local people initially hailed the invading German army as liberators from Soviet tyranny. But as in Poland, the army was quickly followed by the murderous S.S. and its *Einsatzgruppen*, which killed Jews, Communists, Gypsies, the physically and mentally handicapped, and anyone suspected of actively resisting the German occupation. The S.S. did not spare women or children. The Germans frequently killed Russian prisoners, or allowed them to die of hunger or exposure. Those who survived were used as forced labor, as were many civilians. As in other places the Germans had conquered, they retaliated against local populations when Germans were killed by resistance fighters, usually at the rate of 100 civilians for every German killed.²⁷ Such brutality quickly transformed the friendly locals into sworn enemies.

Defeat and Judgment. Hitler's position became more difficult on December 7, 1941 when Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into

²⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer sensed that Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union was a fatal mistake. In September 1941, when German armies were advancing deep into Russia, Bonhoeffer visited Switzerland and remarked to Willem Visser 't Hooft concerning the German invasion, "So this is the beginning of the end. The old man will never get out of this."

²⁵ The Germans were so confident of a swift victory in Russia that only about 20% of the German army had sufficient winter clothing. By December 5, 1941, the temperature near Moscow had dropped to 36 degrees below zero, Fahrenheit. According to the German General Heinz Guderian, the temperature five days later had dropped to 63 degrees below zero.

²⁶ On March 30, 1941, Hitler told a group of more than 200 senior officers that Barbarossa—the invasion of Russia—"will have to be conducted with unprecedented, merciless and unrelenting harshness." No one protested. On June 6, 1941, Hitler issued the Commissar Order, directing the German army to kill all captured Soviet leaders.

²⁷ The Nazis even wiped out some towns and villages in retaliation for local partisan attacks—examples include the Czech village of Lidice, the French village of Oradour-sur-Glane, and the Italian town of Marzabotto.

the war on the side of Britain and the Soviet Union—collectively known as the Allies. The tide turned for good on January 31, 1943, when the German Sixth Army surrendered to the Soviets at Stalingrad after being hopelessly surrounded for more than two months. From then until the end of the war, the Germans never regained the initiative, but were in almost constant retreat.

In May 1943 the German and Italian troops in North Africa surrendered—a military disaster for Hitler which was almost as bad as Stalingrad. Two months later the British and Americans invaded Sicily, and by September Italy had dropped out of the war. One by one, Hitler's other allies also fell away as the Allies closed in—Hungary in March 1944; Bulgaria and Rumania in August 1944; and Finland in September 1944. The Allies' invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944 opened up the second front the Germans had dreaded since the First World War.

The end for Adolf Hitler came on April 30, 1945. As the Soviet Army closed in on Berlin from all sides, he committed suicide by shooting himself in the head. A week later Germany surrendered unconditionally. Most of the other Nazi leaders either followed Hitler's lead by committing suicide, or were condemned to death or prison by the Allies. Here is a brief list of some of the leading Nazis and their ultimate fate:

Martin Bormann, chief of the Nazi party, and Hitler's personal secretary after May 1941 – died May 1, 1945. He probably committed suicide, but may have been killed by a Russian artillery shell.

Karl Brandt, Hitler's personal physician, who oversaw the T-4 euthanasia program, medical experiments on concentration camp victims, and involuntary abortions on women the Nazis deemed inferior or disabled – tried and hanged by the Allies in 1948.

Anton Burger, commander at Theresienstadt concentration camp – died in Essen in 1991, unpunished.

Grand Admiral Karl Doenitz (or Dönitz) – was sentenced to 10 years in prison at Nuremberg.

Adolf Eichmann, head of the Gestapo's Jewish Evacuation Office and a leading organizer of the Final Solution – escaped to South America until he was abducted by Israeli agents and put on trial in Israel in 1961. He was convicted and hanged in 1962.

Hans Frank, Governor-General of Poland – sentenced to death at Nuremberg, and hanged on October 16, 1946.

Wilhelm Frick, Interior Minister – sentenced to death at Nuremberg, and hanged on October 16, 1946.

Hans Fritzsche, Propaganda Ministry Department Chief – acquitted at Nuremberg.

Walter (or Walther) Funk, Minister of Economics (November 1937 – 1945) – sentenced to life in prison at Nuremberg. However, he was released in 1958 due to ill health.

Joseph Goebbels, Minister of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda – committed suicide with his wife on May 1, 1945, after first murdering their six children.

Hermann Göring, head of the Luftwaffe (German Air Force) – sentenced to death by the Allies at Nuremberg, but committed suicide on October 16, 1946 just before he was scheduled to be hanged.

Gustav Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach, Chairman of the Reich Association (or Estate) of German Industry – found unfit to stand trial by the Allies.

Rudolf Hess, deputy to the Führer until May 1941 – sentenced to life in prison at Nuremberg. He died in August, 1987.

Heinrich Himmler, head of the S.S. – committed suicide on May 23, 1945 after being apprehended by the British.

Major General Alfred Jodl – sentenced to death at Nuremberg, and hanged on October 16, 1946.

Ernst Kaltenbrunner, GESTAPO Chief – sentenced to death at Nuremberg, and hanged on October 16, 1946.

General Field Marshal Keitel, OKW chief of staff – sentenced to death at Nuremberg, and hanged on October 16, 1946.

Erich Koch, Reichskommissar of the Ukraine 1941-1944 – extradited to Poland in 1950 and disappeared.

Robert Ley, head of the German Labor Front (a/k/a DAF, for *Deutsche Arbeitsfront*) – committed suicide.

Joseph Mengele, chief medical officer at Auschwitz – escaped to Argentina and died there in 1979.

Konstantin von Neurath, Reich Protector and governor of Bohemia and Moravia – sentenced to 15 years in prison at Nuremberg. He was pardoned after 8 years.

Franz von Papen, former Vice Chancellor – acquitted at Nuremberg.

Grand Admiral Erich Raeder – sentenced to life in prison at Nuremberg.

Joachim von Ribbentrop, Foreign Minister – sentenced to death at Nuremberg, and hanged on October 16, 1946.

Alfred Rosenberg, Minister of the East from April 1941 – sentenced to death at Nuremberg, and hanged on October 16, 1946.

Fritz Saukel, Plenipotentiary-General for Labor Mobilization – sentenced to death at Nuremberg, and hanged on October 16, 1946.

Hjalmar Schacht, Reichsbank President (and Hitler's Minister of Economics, 1933 - November 1937) – acquitted at Nuremberg.

Baldur von Schirach, head of the Hitler Youth – sentenced to 20 years in prison at Nuremberg.

Arthur Seyss-Inquart, Reich Commissioner and governor of the Netherlands – sentenced to death at Nuremberg, and hanged on October 16, 1946.

Albert Speer, Minister of Armaments – sentenced to 20 years in prison at Nuremberg. He died in 1981.

Julius Streicher, publisher of *Der Stürmer* (the Nazis' hate-filled newspaper) – sentenced to death at Nuremberg, and hanged on October 16, 1946.