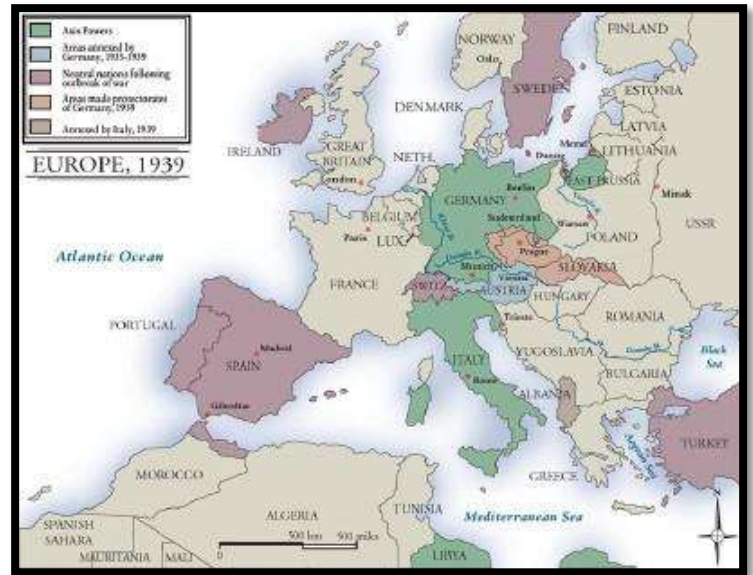


A Short History of Nazi Germany

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In 1900, Germany, a very large country compared to most of its tiny European neighbors, was Europe's strongest power. When it was defeated by a combination of allies, including England, France, Italy, and the United States, in World War I, it proclaimed itself a republic and sued for peace. The German leaders hoped to help frame the Treaty of Versailles which ended the war, but all the victorious allies were determined to punish the new republic for the cost of war, both monetary and emotional.



The Allies forced Germany to sign the Treaty of Versailles, inflicting huge penalties on the beaten country. The treaty placed full blame for the war on Germany and stripped it of its territories. Germany was disarmed and ordered to pay huge amounts for the damages it had done to civilian properties in all of Europe. The punishment was more than most Germans would accept. Not only were they impoverished by the terms of the treaty, but the proud people were severely humiliated.

The anger and indignation the German people felt did not lessen as time went on, and the economic results of the treaty included upwardly spiraling inflation, taking much of what they needed for their daily needs. Most Germans did not accept blame for the war and felt they were being unfairly singled out as the cause of a war which had multiple causes. The feeling that their country had been "stabbed in the back" grew through the 1920s and gave rise to various nationalistic groups. One of these groups, the National Socialist German Worker's Party, led by a former house painter named Adolf Hitler, grew as it attracted all sorts of malcontents. They called themselves "Nazis."

Hitler's entire life and personality were governed by hate, anger, and disenfranchisement. A gifted orator, he was able to arouse the enthusiasm of huge groups of people. Hitler's message to the German people was that the Jews had caused all of Germany's woes and that they were at fault for Germany's decline in world prestige. He used stereotypes and propaganda to gain rampant support. He said that the "real" Germans were the members of a superior Aryan race and that the Jews, Romani (Roma), and the Slavs of Eastern Europe were subhuman—not fit to live in civilized society.

Hitler touched on an old racist nerve in the German masses as he preached his message of violence and hate, and the racism he encouraged fed on the humiliations of the postwar years. The German people longed to once again have their former power and prestige, and Hitler's party attracted a wide following.

The Nazi Party was one of many small political parties in Germany. In 1932, thirteen years after it began, the Nazis became the largest party in the Reichstag—Germany's legislative body. The aged President von Hindenburg of the Republic was unable to keep control, and in 1933, Hitler convinced the old man to appoint him (Hitler) as Chancellor of Germany. Immediately, Hitler demanded that the Reichstag grant him emergency powers for four years. The Reichstag gave in to Hitler (and his party's) demands and then dissolved itself—thereby leaving the Nazi party the only form of government. Hitler, within two months of becoming Chancellor, became absolute ruler of Germany.

From then on, nothing could stop him. Before he committed suicide twelve years later, fifty-five million people would die in Europe.

Many people did not believe that Hitler would eliminate all those whom he considered unworthy to live, but most German people accepted his rule. Those who did not turned their heads and closed their eyes as he developed his dreaded secret police (The Gestapo), turned his Storm Troopers loose on Jews (allowing any behavior/treatment against them to be allowed if not encouraged), and began the grisly job of erecting places of slave labor and mass murder—the concentration camps. A few Jews left Germany during the early years—those who were able to flee were put in the position of seeking asylum in countries who did not want to accept them either—but escape soon became impossible for most.

Hitler moved quickly to put his racist theories into practice. Jews were dismissed from government positions and forbidden to work in universities, schools, radio, movies, the theater, or journalism. They were not allowed to practice law, or medicine, or engage in business. All their means of earning a livelihood were taken from them. Jews were segregated, and Jewish children were forbidden to go to school with non-Jewish children. Non-Jews could not work for Jews, and neither was allowed to legally marry the other.

In 1939 the army Hitler had been preparing for six years began to roll. Poland fell in eighteen days to Germany. (The Jews restrained to the Warsaw Ghetto would stage a revolt that lasted longer than their country, remembered as the "Warsaw Ghetto Uprising"). Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium, and France were conquered within six months. Hitler had signed a non-aggression treaty with Joseph Stalin, the dictator of the Soviet Union, but it did not stop him from attacking that country as well. A dark cloud had descended on Europe. For the six years it took the combined forces of England, the United States, Russia, and the underground Resistance forces to liberate Europe, Hitler's concentration and death camps continued as efficient killing machines, and all Europe was devastated. Total evil had been turned on the continent of Europe, an evil that would not be defeated until May, 1945.