

RISE OF A DICTATOR



Adolf Hitler promised to rebuild Germany and make Germany strong again. Germans, he said, were the master race. The German army had not really been beaten in World War I. Hitler said Germany lost the war because it had been betrayed by traitors and Jews. Germany must rebuild its army he said. It must win back its losses in World War I and take its place as a world power once again.

That was what Adolf Hitler told the German people after World War I. Many Germans listened to him because Germany was not doing well as a result of the provisions forced on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles. Many people were without jobs and were hungry. Adolf Hitler promised them jobs — and greatness. So, the German people began to join Hitler's political party. It was called the National Socialist Party, or Nazi Party for short. In 1923, Hitler and the Nazis tried to take power. But the police fired on them and sent them running. Their plan was foiled.

Then Hitler was put in jail. There he wrote a book called *Mein Kampf*, or *My Struggle*. It told of his plans to conquer much of Europe. Lands lost in World War I would be retaken. Germany would grab "living space" from Russia and other east European countries.

Hitler also blamed the Jews for Germany's troubles and all the evils of the world. Hitler built up the Nazi Party when he got out of prison. He won the support of many generals and businessmen who believed that the Nazis would save Germany from a Communist take-over. The world-wide Great Depression of the 1930's gave

Hitler his big chance. Again, many Germans were out of work and hungry. Hitler's promises of jobs and German greatness sounded better than ever.

In the 1932 elections, the Nazi Party got four votes out of every ten in the German Parliament. Because the Nazi Party controlled Parliament, Hitler was appointed as Germany's Chancellor by the German President Hindenburg. Chancellor is the title of one of the most important leaders in Germany's government. When President Hindenburg died unexpectedly in 1934, Hitler assumed control. Within a few months, he got special laws passed that took away most of the German people's civil rights. The laws placed all the power in the hands of Hitler and the Nazi Party. So, Hitler became dictator. Hitler did away with all freedom. He abolished the German Constitution. Through fear and force, he ruled Germany with an iron fist.

Hitler hated the democratic process, the Christian religion, and anything that wasn't German. His secret police, known as the Gestapo, shot or jailed all who were against him. Labor unions and all political parties except the Nazis were outlawed. Books the Nazis didn't like were burned. Jews were driven from their jobs and businesses. Many fled to other countries.

In 1934, Hitler began to prepare Germany for war. "Conquest is not only a right, but a duty," he told the German people. Today, he bragged, the Nazis rule Germany. Tomorrow, he promised, Germans would rule the world. Hitler built the German army and air force into a powerful war machine. Factories turned out weapons and military supplies day and night. Of course, everybody was at work or in the army. Hitler built highways and monuments to German culture. The Germans thought Hitler was a great man. Little did the people know, however, that he was leading Germany into a great and catastrophic war.

In 1936, Hitler sent troops into Germany's Rhineland. This was against the Treaty of Versailles, which said that there should be no German soldiers in the land west of the Rhine River. But Britain and France did nothing. This made Hitler bolder. Soon after, he sent German troops to take over Austria. When the League of Nations did nothing, Hitler decided to grab Czechoslovakia in 1938. Then, in 1939, Hitler turned his eyes on Poland. France and Britain said they would go to war if Hitler attacked Poland.

How did people in the United States take all this? At first, they were not worried about it. The United States had enough problems of its own. It was too busy fighting the Depression at home to be concerned about Hitler over in Europe. Besides, many Americans felt they had no business in Europe's affairs. "Let Europe stew in its own juice," these people said. "Let's avoid doing anything that might get us involved in a war again," other people warned. The horrors of the First World War were still fresh in the minds of the American people. The United States getting involved in another war over there was simply out of the question to most Americans.

The U.S. Congress felt the same way. It passed a series of Neutrality Acts in the 1930's. These acts were meant to keep the U.S. out of war. They forbade trade with either side in a war. But, in 1937, President Roosevelt began to warn the American people of the dangers from abroad. Few Americans paid much attention to these

warnings. Wasn't the United States protected by two oceans? The best course was to stay neutral they thought. Most Americans did not begin to change their minds until September 1, 1939. On that day, Germany sent its troops across the border and invaded Poland. Britain and France vowed to stand by Poland and declared war on Germany. World War II had begun.

