A Short History of Nazi Germany

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 except the United States were determined to punish the new republic.

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 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 and anger. 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 said that “real” Germans were the members of a superior Aryan race and that the Jews, Gypsies, and the Slavs of Eastern Europe were subhuman, not fit to live in civilized society.

Hitler touched 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 Chancellor of Germany. Immediately, Hitler demanded that the Reichstag grant him emergency powers for four years. The Reichstag gave in to Hitler’s demands and then dissolved itself. 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 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, and began the grisly job of erecting places of mass murder and slave labor, the concentration camps. A few Jews left Germany during the early years, 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 or marry them.

In 1939 the army Hitler had been preparing for six years began to roll. Poland fell in eighteen days to Germany. 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 forces to liberate Europe, Hitler’s concentration 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.

Activity: Could Hitler have been stopped?

One of the great questions of the twentieth century is whether or not Hitler could have come into power under different political, social, or economic climates than the ones which did exist. Choose one of the following, and write a page discussing the statement: Hitler could not have come into power if...

1. the German economy had been healthy and strong.
2. the Allies had allowed Germany to participate in the peace talks of 1919 and not punished the country so severely.
3. Germany would have had two strong democratic political parties.
4. President Hindenburg had said no to Hitler’s demands.
5. the Reichstag had said no to Hitler’s demands.
6. there had been widespread public demonstrations against Hitler’s policies.
7. children had been taught in school the dangers of anti-Semitism.

In your paper give specific reasons why you believe your opinion would have been true and how that situation would have prevented the terrible consequences of Hitler’s reign of terror. Also answer the question: Could what happened in Germany happen again there or anywhere else?