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HITLER

MICHAEL LYNCH



Hitler

Adolf Hitler is the most notorious political figure of the twentieth century. The story of his life, how he became a dictator, and how he managed to convince so many to follow his cause is a subject of perennial fascination.

Balancing narrative and analysis, this biography employs a chronological approach to describe the main features of Hitler's career. Set against the background of developments in Germany and Europe during his lifetime, the text tells the extraordinary story of how an Austrian layabout rose to become Führer of the Third Reich.

The chapters incorporate into their narrative the major debates surrounding Hitler's ideas, behaviour and historical significance. Particular attention is paid to his experience as a soldier in 1914–18 and to the reasons why his original left-wing sympathies transmuted into Nazism. Arguments over the real character of Hitler's dictatorship are analysed and a measured assessment is offered of the disputed issues of how far Hitler initiated the Third Reich's domestic and foreign policies himself and to what extent he was controlled by events. His destructive leadership of wartime Germany is now a subject of close scrutiny among historians and the book's final chapters deal with this theme and offer a set of reflections on Hitler's relationship with the German people and his legacy to the German nation.

Michael Lynch provides a balanced guide to this most difficult of figures that will be enlightening for students and general readers alike.

Michael Lynch is an Honorary Fellow in the School of Historical Studies at the University of Leicester. His research interests are in modern European and Chinese history and his recent student-friendly publications include: *Mao* (2004), *Modern China* (2006), *Autocracy to Communism: Russia 1894–1941* (2008), and *Nazi Germany* (2012).

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Hitler

Michael Lynch

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SM (1917–2003)

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Chronology

Table 1

<i>Date</i>	<i>Personal</i>	<i>Political</i>	<i>General</i>
1889	Born in Braunau am Inn, Austria-Hungary		
1902	His father dies; leaves school		
1907	Goes to Vienna; death of mother		
1908	Fails Academy entrance exam		
1913	Moves to Munich		
1914	Arrested and sent to Austria for failure to register for conscription; fails medical, returns to Munich; joins German army; awarded the Iron Cross		Outbreak of First World War
1915	Serves as a regimental dispatch runner		
1916	Wounded; recuperates; visits Berlin and Munich		Battle of the Somme
1917	Returns to his regiment in France		
1918	Awarded the Iron Cross, First Class; is gassed, enters Pasewalk military hospital	Naval mutinies; Kaiser abdicates; 'November criminals' accept an armistice; German Communist Party (KPD) formed	Spring offensive; end of First World War

Table 1 (continued)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Personal</i>	<i>Political</i>	<i>General</i>
1919	Works for the Munich Soviet; attends a series of lectures at Munich University; influenced by anti-Semitic Russian émigrés; September – attends meeting of DAP; appointed army information officer; joins DAP	Spartacist Rising in Berlin crushed; Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxembourgh murdered; Munich Soviet destroyed; Weimar Republic created	Versailles Treaty signed by German delegation
1920	Speaks at largest party gathering; leaves the army; forms contacts with <i>Aufbau</i>	February – DAP becomes NSDAP (Nazi Party) and issues a 25-point programme	The Kapp putsch
1921	Becomes leader of NSDAP	Formation of SA	Allies fix Germany reparations at £6.6 billion
1922	Charged with assault; serves a month in prison	Mussolini leads Fascists to power in Italy	Rapallo Treaty
1923	Leads unsuccessful Munich putsch, is injured and arrested	French occupation of the Ruhr; hyperinflation in Germany; Nazi Party outlawed	
1924	Tried and imprisoned; writes <i>Mein Kampf</i> ; December – released from Landsberg prison	Strasser elected to the Reichstag; NSDAP picks up 32 Reichstag seats	Dawes Plan
1925	Relinquishes Austrian citizenship; SS, Hitler's personal bodyguard, formed; takes holiday in Obersalzberg	Nazi Party reformed; April – Hitler encouraged Ludendorff to stand for the presidency of the Republic; Hindenburg elected president	
1926	Re-establishes himself as NSDAP leader; second volume of <i>Mein Kampf</i>	February – Bamberg conference	Germany joins League of Nations
1927	Attends first Nuremberg Nazi Party rally		National insurance scheme introduced for workers

Table 1 (continued)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Personal</i>	<i>Political</i>	<i>General</i>
1928	Makes first public speech in Berlin; builds Haus Wachenfeld, later to become Berghof	Nazis lose ground in Reichstag election	
1929	Meets Eva Braun; Geli Raubal stays with him in Munich	Death of Stresemann; formation of the National Opposition (NO)	Great Crash in USA; the Young Plan; Nazis form a provincial government in Thuringia
1930	Christa Schroeder begins work as one of his secretaries; creates Nazi bureau for agriculture	Nazis become second largest party in Reichstag; Joseph Goebbels put in control of Nazi propaganda; Strasser leaves NSDAP	
1931	Suicide of Geli Raubal; becomes a vegetarian	Formation of Harzburg Front	German bank failures
1932	Becomes a German citizen; gains 30% of vote in presidential election; begins association with Eva Braun	March – presidential election; July – Nazis win 230 Reichstag seats; Brüning resigns as Chancellor	Unemployment in Germany exceeds 6 million; government ban placed on the SA
1933	Becomes Chancellor; wins plebiscite	Reichstag fire; Enabling Act; book burning in Berlin; Gleichschaltung instituted	Germany withdraws from the League of Nations
1934	Becomes president and chancellor; visits Venice for talks with Mussolini	'Night of the Long Knives'; death of Hindenburg; trade unions broken; referendum	German-Polish non-aggression pact; Austrian Nazis attempt a coup; Dollfuss murdered
1935	Eva Braun's further suicide attempt	Plebiscite on status of Saarland; Wehrmacht created; Nuremberg Race Laws; Blomberg made C-in-C of the Wehrmacht	Conscription reintroduced in Germany; Anglo-German Naval Agreement; Hoare-Laval Pact

Table 1 (continued)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Personal</i>	<i>Political</i>	<i>General</i>
1936	Eva Braun lives with him at the Berghof as unofficial hostess	Rome–Berlin Axis; Anti-Comintern Pact; 98.8% backing for Hitler in plebiscite; 4-Year Plan introduced	Reoccupation of the Rhineland; Spanish Civil War begins; Berlin Olympic Games
1937		Hossbach Memorandum	Destruction of Guernica; Reichstag ceases to meet
1938	Enters Vienna; holds court in Prague; appoints himself C-in-C	<i>Kristallnacht</i> ; Blomberg and Fritsch affairs	<i>Anschluss</i> with Austria; Sudetenland occupied; Munich crisis
1939	Opens new Reich Chancellery; threatens the destruction of the Jewish race in Europe; celebrates 50th birthday; escapes assassination; initiates Third Reich's euthanasia programme	Pact of Steel between Germany and Italy; Nazi–Soviet Pact; Membership of Hitler Youth made compulsory	Rest of Czechoslovakia taken; Poland invaded; Britain and France declare war on Germany; 'Phoney War' (1939–40) begins
1940	Triumphal visit to Paris; announces plans to invade England; talks with Franco	Germany, Italy and Japan sign the 'Tripartite Pact'	Norwegian campaign; Dunkirk evacuation; Fall of France; Italy enters the war; RAF bomb Berlin; Battle of Britain, beginning of Blitz; Italy begins North African desert campaigns; Warsaw ghetto opens
1941	Guest of Mussolini in Italy; sets up new military HQ (Wolf's Lair) in East Prussia; declares war on USA	Hess flies to Britain; first mass killing of Jews in Poland; Commissar order; 'Night and Fog' order	Rommel captures Tobruk; invasion of Soviet Union; <i>Bismarck</i> sunk; Operation Barbarossa; Pearl Harbor attack by the Japanese on USA
1942	Assumes supreme legal power	Wannsee meeting plans final solution; Himmler orders deportation of all German gypsies to Auschwitz	German forces reach the outskirts of Stalingrad; Battle of El Alamein

Table 1 (continued)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Personal</i>	<i>Political</i>	<i>General</i>
1943	Summons Rommel to Wolf's Lair; visits Mussolini in Venice; survives a number of assassination attempts		Defeat of German 6th Army at Stalingrad; Anglo-American forces land in Sicily; Battle of Kursk; Mussolini overthrown; Marshal Badoglio signs armistice with the Allies; Afrika Corps defeated in North Africa; Skorzeny leads rescue of Mussolini; Battle of the Atlantic; Operation Citadel
1944	Survives July Bomb plot; injuries exacerbate his poor health	Plotters arrested	Allied D-Day landings in Normandy; Operation Bagration; V weapons launched on Britain; Paris and Brussels liberated; Skorzeny seizes Admiral Horthy's son in Hungary; Warsaw Rising; Ardennes Offensive (Battle of the Bulge)
1945	Makes his final proclamation; marries Eva Braun; commits suicide in Berlin bunker	Third Reich collapses	Mussolini murdered in Milan; Germany surrenders

Introduction

In July 2008, a man, incensed by the sight of an effigy of Adolf Hitler on show at Madame Tussaud's waxworks in London, severed its head with a knife. In May 2011, a Danish director was debarred from the Cannes Film Festival for saying that he understood Hitler and sympathised with him 'a little bit'. The Festival organisers declared the comment to be 'unacceptable, intolerable and contrary to the ideals of humanity.'¹ In August 2011, the BBC children's television adventure *Doctor Who* described Hitler as 'history's most notorious war criminal'. Adolf Hitler's ability from beyond the grave to excite such reaction is one sign of the execration in which he is still held seven decades after his death. The reasons for the loathing are obvious. After becoming leader of Germany in 1933, he pursued a programme that led, at home, to the suffering and death of millions of his own people and, abroad, to the most destructive war in modern history. During that war, six million Jews were deliberately killed in accordance with his policies.

A deep fascination accompanies the loathing. Interest in Hitler continues to grow. Over one thousand biographies of him have been published since his death in 1945. One of the most insistent questions with which writers of those works grapple is how was it that between 1933 and 1945 Hitler, a dull nonentity for the first thirty years of his life, could beguile one of the most cultured peoples in Europe into following him on a path of nihilism. It is unlikely that this question will ever be satisfactorily answered, though the effort to do so will doubtless continue to inspire and activate historians.

Hitler's career

Born in 1889 into a lower-ranking civil service family in the Austrian part of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire, Hitler had no outstanding characteristics as a young man that hinted at the extraordinary career he was to have. He left home in 1907 and went to Vienna where he stayed for the next six years. Later, in his book *Mein Kampf*, written in 1924, he claimed his Vienna years were a profoundly formative period during which he developed the attitudes which determined his thinking and politics from then on. Love of all things German and hatred of the Jews became the bedrock of his *Weltanschauung* (world view) from which he never departed. His claim was untrue; *Mein Kampf* was a set of distortions. Hitler did not develop fixed views in Vienna and he was not notably anti-Semitic when he left there. Modern research shows it was not until after the Great War, in which he served as a German soldier, and the collapse of Germany in 1918 that Hitler's political outlook took a discernible form. Before then, he appears not to have had very strong ideas on anything much. He was a drifter and something of a dilettante. Another *Mein Kampf* untruth was that the hardship of his existence in Vienna toughened him for the life he was to lead. The fact was he had inherited a family stipend and, although not rich, he was not penurious. If he lived a grim hostel life, as he claimed, it was because he chose to. He did not like work and, beyond occasionally trying to sell his own paintings, seldom engaged in it.

In describing his war service, Hitler further blurred the record. By selecting particular episodes and omitting others, he presented a picture of his involvement which is not borne out by the accounts given by his regimental comrades. At the time, he raised no objections to serving with Jewish comrades or being commanded by Jewish officers. Hitler was not a physical coward, but the outstanding valour ascribed to him by later Nazi propagandists was an exaggeration. He exhibited no capacity for leadership and after four years in the ranks had risen no higher than Private First Class.

Germany's humiliating defeat in 1918, accepted by the new Weimar government, left Hitler angry but bewildered. His confusion over how to react to the troubled times left him susceptible to the extreme political ideas competing for attention in post-war

Munich where he was stationed. His first notable move was to support the Communists, who for a brief period in April–May of 1919 seized power in the city and established a revolutionary Soviet. He glossed over the incident in *Mein Kampf* by pretending he had opposed the Soviet. He was very aware that to have admitted that he had been pro-Communist, even for a short time, would damage the legend he wished to create of his adamant progress towards Nazism. However, the evidence indicates that, having been elected a Battalion representative, he enthusiastically liaised with the Soviet before its bloody suppression. Then, when his hopes in the revolutionary regime in Munich were blighted, Hitler's politics swiftly turned to the opposite extreme as he became drawn towards another form of socialism. The key to this transition was his coming into direct contact in the autumn of 1919 with influential nationalists in southern Germany. Strongly influenced themselves by the ideas of White émigrés who had fled from Bolshevik Russia after the 1917 Revolution, these nationalists explained Germany's troubles in terms of a Jewish–Bolshevik plot to exploit Weimar's weaknesses and subvert German culture and society.

Impressed by this explanation for his adopted country's ills, Hitler joined the German Workers' Party, the forerunner of the NSDAP (Nazi Party). Discovering in himself a gift for public speaking and demagoguery, Hitler soon became the leader of the Nazi movement. Having spent three years speaking, writing and campaigning to spread Nazi ideas, Hitler then made an attempt to take power by force. Financed by Aufbau, the white Russian organisation, he plotted with other disaffected groups to overthrow the Bavarian government in Munich. But the resultant putsch in November 1923 failed. Hitler was arrested, tried and sentenced to a five-year prison term, but not before he had effectively used the trial as a propaganda platform. Released after barely a year inside, during which time he wrote *Mein Kampf*, Hitler adopted a new strategy. His ultimate aim of a Nazi takeover of Germany remained the same, but he resolved that instead of openly using force he would exploit the Weimar electoral system to gain power legally. This was not an abandonment of violence. Indeed, the Nazi protective unit, the SA, became notorious for the ferocity of its attacks upon opponents. Hitler, however, while privately encouraging these methods, publicly disavowed them. He did not wish to

alienate the *Mittelstand*, German society's solid, responsible classes, whose support he was seeking.

Hitler's departure from pre-putsch methods dismayed many in the Nazi Party, with the result that a power struggle arose between him and those members, most prominently Gregor Strasser, who wanted to continue along a socialist revolutionary path. That Hitler was able to overcome them and assert his authority was not down simply to his powers of leadership, remarkable though they were. Luck played a large part in the form of the economic crises that recurrently struck Germany in the 1920s.

Economic uncertainties swung voters towards the Nazi Party, vindicating his constitutional approach and undermining Strasser's position. The worldwide Depression, which began in 1929, caused soaring unemployment in Germany, which seemed to be returning to the grim days of 1918. This proved to be the Nazis' great opportunity. Hitler attacked the incompetent Weimar parties which had combined in a series of coalition governments, none of them capable of solving Germany's problems. The Nazi Party grew in popularity in each of the elections between 1928 and July 1932, gaining over a third of the popular vote by that last date. That did not guarantee its ultimate success. Indeed, its vote slipped by 4 per cent in a second election in 1932. But Hitler was not expecting an overall majority. In developing the NSDAP into the single largest party, he had made it an indispensable part of Weimar politics. He and his party could not now be ignored.

Hitler's personal popularity was evident in the two presidential elections of 1932. Although he lost to the incumbent Paul von Hindenburg, the thirteen million votes he won showed that he was a recognised national figure. He calculated that this now gave him the chance to manoeuvre himself into office. This he duly did. Refusing to accept any office other than chancellor, he outwitted and out-bluffed the Weimar politicians who, having tried to block him, eventually gave in and accepted there was no alternative to Hitler. Their hope was that the conservative cabinet with which he would have to work would control him. They were greatly mistaken. Becoming chancellor in January 1933, he proceeded to govern on his own terms. Without abolishing the Weimar constitution, he simply bypassed it. Following the burning in February of the Reichstag building, denounced by Hitler as the

first stage of an intended communist rising, he pushed through an Enabling Act, authorising him to take all necessary measures to defend the nation. Under its warrant, he embarked on a policy of *Gleichschaltung* (consolidation) that, by the autumn of 1934, had effectively removed all possibility of his being legally opposed. With the Reichstag neutered, all other political parties dissolved, the trade unions outlawed, the army and the legal profession sworn to loyalty, and the churches quiescent, there was no legitimate source of challenge to his authority.

With his silencing of all external opposition almost complete, Hitler then moved against those he regarded as his enemies within the party. In July 1934, in the Night of the Long Knives, he launched an attack upon the SA. His objective was to prevent Ernst Röhm, the SA leader, from using this powerful force as a basis for challenging for power. Backed by the army and Heinrich Himmler's SS, which were keen to destroy Röhm's rival paramilitary units, Hitler personally supervised Röhm's arrest and murder and the dispersal of the SA. A month later, his dominance was further enhanced when, on Hindenburg's death, he became president as well as chancellor.

Once the state had been structured according to the *Gleichschaltung* process by 1934, Hitler stepped back from the domestic scene. The ordinary play of politics and government was not his primary concern. He did not give up power over domestic affairs but he allowed others to exercise authority in his name. The responsibility for overseeing the economy, society and government, he left to others. His chief domestic demands were that the Third Reich rearm and that it became a racial state. This second demand meant essentially that the Jews had to be removed. Anti-Semitic persecution was the leitmotif of Nazi Germany. Yet even here, he seldom intervened directly to dictate policy details. His usual practice, as in most domestic matters, was to approve or reject programmes put to him. The consequence was that ministers and officials followed a policy of what was called in Germany 'working towards the Führer', best described as the pattern by which administrators made a judgement as to what Hitler wanted and then attempted to fulfil what they believed his intentions to be.

A major reason for Hitler's disinclination to be involved in everyday matters at home was his preoccupation with foreign

affairs. His conduct of foreign policy may be said to have given definition to his role as Führer of the Third Reich. In keeping with the promises he had made from *Mein Kampf* onwards, he set out to undo the restrictions placed upon Germany by the Versailles settlement. His aim was to restore to Germany the territories and peoples taken from it in 1919. This has sometimes been presented as if he began with a scheduled agenda, towards which he then systematically worked. It was never as simple as that. Hitler was an opportunist and a chancer. It is only in hindsight that he appears to be implementing a predetermined plan. Between 1933 and 1939, when his policies tipped into war, he got away with a number of gambles. Germany's rearmament programme beginning in 1933, the reoccupation of the Rhineland in 1936, the reincorporation of Austria into greater Germany in 1938: all these initiatives were major contraventions of Versailles and Hitler fully expected them to arouse the active opposition of the Western powers. But no such opposition arose. It was not until he encroached upon Czechoslovakia that France and Britain intervened and even then they were so eager to avoid war that they eventually settled the issue on his terms in the Munich agreement of September 1938.

Success at Munich emboldened Hitler to go beyond what previously might be justified as the legitimate recovery of German territory. His demands on the Czech state and on Poland in 1939 were patent expansionism and Britain and France at last acted by declaring war on Germany at the beginning of September 1939. Ten days before that happened, Hitler had stood diplomacy on its head by coming to an agreement with his great ideological enemy, Stalin, and entering into the Nazi–Soviet Pact. This left him free to attack in the west knowing that his eastern flank was secure. By June of 1940, France was beaten and Britain seemed on the verge of defeat. It was a position of enormous strength. Germany appeared invincible. Yet within five years Germany had lost that invincibility and lay a vanquished and broken nation, a dramatic transition that was wholly Hitler's doing. By a series of decisions that were his alone, he led the Third Reich to crushing defeat.

Among his major mistakes, three were so significant that they deserve mention, even in an outline. His decision to launch an attack on the USSR in June 1941, his declaration of war on the USA in December and his fanatical persistence in making the destruction

of the Jews a priority when sheer necessity cried out for Germany to redirect its diminishing resources into saving itself: these were his fatal strategic errors. Directed by a belief in the infallibility of his own judgement that intensified even as Germany's plight worsened, and surrounded by associates who declined to question his decisions even when they knew them to be wrong, Hitler was overtaken in the last stage of the war by the lethal conviction that it was better for Germany to go down in flames than to surrender. His suicide and the burning of his body along with that of Eva Braun, his wife of one day, late in April 1945 were an apt fulfilment of this destructive reasoning. Germany's tragedy was that his death came too late. In the previous nine months of what, by any rational measure, had become a pointless struggle, Germany's military and civilian death toll reached over four million.

Historians and Hitler

Given Hitler's extraordinary career, the scale of destruction associated with it, and its shattering impact upon its times, it is unsurprising that it has always excited controversy among those seeking to interpret it. For a generation after 1945, the broad historical consensus was that Hitler had been personally responsible for the creation of Nazi Germany and, by extension, for the tragedy which overtook Germany and Europe when he put his extreme nationalist and racist ideas into practice. This raised certain questions. Was he an aberration or a part of a logical development of German history? If the latter, what was it about the character of Germany that had spawned such an individual?

One answer that has commanded attention is that Hitler and Nazism were the culmination of a process known as *Sonderweg*, a term encompassing the notion that Germany had evolved along a unique path which placed it outside the democratic trends that had shaped other Western European nations. The essence of the argument is that, since the Lutheran reformation in the sixteenth century, the German peoples had developed an essentially aggressive approach to politics and culture. The result was that in the nineteenth century the movement for the unification of the various Germanic states into one nation followed a reactionary path, with the governing elites pointedly turning their backs on political

modernity. The climax to this came with the creation of Germany as one nation in 1871, achieved by means of a series of deliberately provoked wars with its neighbours. The Germany that emerged as a sovereign state was, therefore, a morally flawed nation, committed to ruthless expansionism as its principal mode of behaviour. Liberal values were stifled and it became an authoritarian and conformist society ready to follow any leader or movement that could satisfy the nation's militant aspirations.

Given such a provenance, it followed that when Germany was defeated in the 1914–18 War, the embittered German people moved towards even greater political extremism. They nursed a deep resentment towards the multi-party Weimar Republic, foisted on them after 1919, which had not only accepted the humiliations imposed on Germany by the post-war peace settlement but also failed to solve the economic crises which afflicted the nation in the post-war era. Thus, when the opportunity arose in the early 1930s, the German people in bitterness and desperation threw off the failed democracy of Weimar and turned to Adolf Hitler and his uncompromisingly xenophobic Nazi Party as the saviours of the honour and well-being of the nation.

Although *Sonderweg* as a concept dates back to the nineteenth century, it was a German historian, Fritz Fischer, who gave it its modern form when he suggested that Hitler's expansionist plans for Germany were essentially a continuation of the racist, imperialist programme which had already been adopted by Germany's leaders by 1914. Fischer's views caused a storm among German historians, who felt it both branded Germany as an irredeemably aggressive nation and lessened Hitler's personal responsibility. An interesting contribution to the disagreement over Hitler's personal role came from a maverick British historian, A.J.P. Taylor, who suggested in 1961 that an examination of Hitler's foreign policy revealed that he had originally had very limited plans for German expansion in Europe and that the war that came in 1939 was not a war he had intended. Taylor's argument began what is sometimes referred to as the 'continentalist versus globalist' dispute in which historians argue over whether Hitler had plans for eventual world domination.

Overlapping with the Fischer controversy was the dispute that became known as the *Historikerstreit*. A key figure here was a combative German philosopher of history, Ernst Nolte, who argued that

Nazism was essentially a reaction to the spread of Bolshevism and that the Holocaust was directly modelled on the annihilation policies first adopted by the Soviet Union. A number of German historians on the Left, most prominently Jürgen Habermas and Hans Mommsen, rejected this as an attempt to diminish the responsibility of Hitler and the capitalist class who had supported him. Their alternative view, which proved equally influential in its way as the *Sonderweg* theory, was the Marxist notion, going back to the 1930s, of Hitler as a tool of aggressive capitalism. In this interpretation, the Nazi movement that Hitler led was a front for the German and European bourgeoisie which created National Socialism as the political mechanism for ensuring capitalism's survival and expansion.

Both the *Sonderweg* and the Marxist interpretations are intrinsically interesting but they reduce Hitler to the product of historical forces, rather than being an individual responsible for his own actions and policies. Yet, granting Hitler full responsibility for what he did creates its own problem. So destructive were his policies in concept and consequence that they invite such epithets as 'monstrous' and 'evil' which sometimes makes him appear so abnormal that he becomes dehumanised. Commenting on this, John Lukacs, the leading authority on the historiography of Adolf Hitler, suggests that the huge number of studies that have appeared since 1945, written against the violent backdrop of the world that Hitler largely created, has had the overall effect of creating a mythical anti-hero whom it is too easy to dismiss as a madman. However, Lukacs observes, 'If he was mad, then the entire Hitler period was nothing but an episode of madness. But Hitler was not mad; he was responsible for what he did and said and thought ... he was a normal human being.'²

In an extension of the *Historikerstreit*, Hans Mommsen and Martin Broszat became concerned that the traditional concentration upon Hitler as the author of the Third Reich's crimes created the wrong historical balance. They did not wish to deny Hitler's culpability but argued that he could not be understood unless the structure of the state which he supposedly controlled was also understood. They suggested that his personal leadership was less significant than the way in which government developed under him. Their view led to what became known as the intentionalist

versus structuralist debate. At its simplest, the debate, which became merged with the argument as to whether Hitler was a strong or weak leader, was a division of opinion over whether Hitler planned the developments that occurred within the Third Reich or whether he was carried along by them. The intentionalist argument suggests that Hitler not only presided over but also directed the main lines of policy; it was his searing beliefs that gave purpose and drive to the policies of the Third Reich.

The structuralist (or functionalist) counter-argument is that, while Hitler was the ultimate authority, in practical terms his leadership was nominal. This was because of his reluctance to concern himself with the details of everyday government and because of the sheer scale of administration required by a state as large as the Third Reich. The consequence was that Nazi Germany became a basically unstable society in which fierce rivalry between individuals, agencies and ministries was the norm as they struggled 'to work towards the Führer'. The resultant system as defined by the structuralists was not an autocracy but a 'polycracy', memorably described by the British historian Jeremy Noakes as 'distinct administrative hierarchies linked to each of the ministries and of newly created government or quasi government agencies, which stood like separate pillars, each narrowly confined by Hitler to their own specialist spheres'.³ Controversially, Mommsen went so far as to suggest that this process which he termed 'cumulative radicalisation'⁴ was the basic reason why the persecution of the Jews developed a momentum that culminated in the Holocaust.

In the 1990s, the dispute was carried a stage further by Daniel Goldhagen, an American historian, who argued that the majority of Germans were complicit in Hitler's annihilation programme. This approach was followed less melodramatically but equally grippingly by Christopher Browning whose studies of ordinary Germans under Hitler led to his disturbing contention that the Third Reich did indeed become a 'polycracy', where Hitler's off-the-cuff proposals were seized upon by officials eager to 'work towards the Führer' by turning vague ideas into deadly policies. Neither Goldhagen nor Browning denied Hitler's central role in the destruction of the Jews; their stress was on how widely the responsibility for implementing the Holocaust was spread among Germans. Nonetheless, both writers came under fierce attack for

their controversial arguments. Goldhagen was accused of lack of scholarship, a charge which Sir Ian Kershaw, the masterly biographer of Adolf Hitler, described as intemperate, adding that Goldhagen's work, whatever its methodological weakness, poses questions that still need answers. However the involvement of the German people is judged, few scholars doubt that Hitler was ultimately responsible for the Holocaust. The researches of Peter Longerich, a German historian, suggest that while Hitler may not have been the master builder of the Holocaust, he was its architect.

Was Hitler a strong or a weak leader? How far did he initiate policy? In what sense, if any, was he a revolutionary? Which of the intentionalist or structuralist arguments better explains Hitler and the Third Reich? How did such a man come to power? Why were there no restrictions upon him arising from the judgement of his own people? Why did the most civilised nation in Europe become prey to someone with such destructive ideas? Was the Holocaust ordered by Hitler or was it the consequence of Nazi Germany's 'cumulative radicalisation'? These are among the pressing questions that occupy historians of Hitler and Nazi Germany.

This book traces the story of Hitler's career and offers an analysis of its key features. Examining the major historiographical disputes and drawing on the new perspectives that modern research provides, it addresses the questions that historians regard as central to the study of Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany.

1 Aimless years, 1889–1919

The young Hitler

It became common in Britain during the Second World War to refer to the leader of the Third Reich as Corporal Schicklgruber. The name was comical to British ears and its use was an effective way of ridiculing him. But the mockery was wrong on two counts: Hitler never became a corporal and his name had never been Schicklgruber. The Führer of Germany from 1933 to 1945 had been born Adolf Hitler, the son of Alois Hitler and Klara Pözl. The playing upon his supposed surname related to the fact that his father, Alois, had been born in 1837, the illegitimate son of Maria Schicklgruber and Johann Hiedler. However, in 1842 Johann and Maria had married. Thirty-four years later, Alois had further legitimised his family name by legally altering his original birth certificate to read Hitler, not Hiedler. There was, therefore, never any question that the surname of all Alois' six children, of whom Adolf was the fourth, was other than Hitler. Interestingly, Adolf was very conscious of the awkwardness of multi-syllabic German names. Musing about the propaganda value of the salute 'Heil Hitler', he said dryly, 'In the circumstances I am more than happy I was not born Oberhubinger or Unterkirchner!'¹

Born in 1889 in Braunau am Inn, near Linz, in the Austrian part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Adolf Hitler had an undistinguished young life. There was little to suggest he was destined for great things. The reliable evidence on which to construct a clear picture is very limited. Hitler's own autobiographical snippets in *Mein Kampf*, written in 1924, are necessarily partial

and the tales later told of him by supposed acquaintances are largely unreliable. Bradley F. Smith, the author of the best authenticated account of the young Hitler, acknowledges that ‘The really important events in shaping the man-to-be largely escape us.’² His most authoritative biographer, Sir Ian Kershaw, regrets that the ‘historical record of Adolf’s early years is very sparse ... there is little to go on which is not retrospective guesswork.’³ Hitler’s own comment on the first eleven or so years of his life was that ‘from that period of my life I have not retained very much in my memory’.⁴ However, in his private conversations in later life he did recall particular instances. He told one of his secretaries that it was as a boy that he first developed a hatred of smoking after making himself sick puffing a cigarette and then setting himself on fire trying to light a pipe in bed. He also explained to her that his distaste for strong drink arose from his shame at losing his school-leaving certificate after falling into a dung heap while drunk on several celebratory glasses of schnapps.⁵

Alois Hitler’s job as a customs official obliged the family to move home frequently. Adolf received the conventionally dull schooling of the rural Austria in which he grew up. His younger sister, Paula, the only other of the six Hitler children to survive infancy, remembered Adolf’s insistence on always giving orders to the other village children with whom he played. She also described the constant tension between her father and brother. Alois Hitler was twenty-three years older than Klara, his second wife. Short-tempered and moody, Alois regularly beat his son with a stick or belt, treatment which the boy learned to bear with stubborn resignation. The basic cause of the ill-feeling between them was Adolf’s refusal to consider following his father into a civil service career. According to Hitler’s own account, when Alois asked him what then he intended to be, he replied that he aimed to be an artist. ‘He wondered whether I was in a sound state of mind ... “Artist! Not as long as I live, never.” ... At that our struggle became stalemate.’⁶ Paula Hitler’s account reads:

Adolf challenged my father to extreme harshness and got his sound thrashing every day. He was a scrubby little rogue, and all attempts of his father to thrash him for his rudeness and to cause him to love the profession of an official of the state were in vain.⁷

Paula added, however, that her mother always tried to compensate for Alois' brutality by caressing the lad and trying 'to obtain with her kindness what the father could not succeed with harshness.'⁸ Such details of Hitler's upbringing have led to suggestions that the traumas suffered in his youth shaped his character and made him vicious and ruthless as an adult. It is perhaps too easy a connection to draw. Cause and effect seldom relate in this simple way. Stern treatment of sons by their fathers was common practice in the Germany and Austria of the late nineteenth century, but it did not always produce damaged adults. In a later reflection, Hitler stated, 'My father often dealt me hard blows. Moreover, I think that was necessary and helped me.'⁹

A similar straining to create psychological links is evident in the theory that Hitler developed his hatred of the Jews – the dominant characteristic of his later career – out of his sorrow and anger at the death from breast cancer of his mother in 1907 following botched treatment by her Jewish doctor, Eduard Bloch. Yet all the contemporary evidence is against it. Hitler was certainly deeply grief-stricken by his mother's death; he described it as 'a terrible blow' and wept profusely at her graveside.¹⁰ But, far from blaming Bloch and nursing a grievance against him, Hitler thanked him for the efforts he had made to save her. For some time after he continued to send the doctor greetings cards extending 'heartiest good wishes'.¹¹ Nowhere in *Mein Kampf*, replete though it is with excoriating hatred for the Jews, is there any hint that Hitler harboured any animosity towards Dr Bloch.

Adolf Hitler wasted his time at school. His father had chosen for him a *Realschule*, which provided vocational training, rather than a *Gymnasium*, which offered academic education. The *Realschule* he attended between 1900 and 1905 gave him the chance to learn and develop useful technical skills, but, beyond showing interest in drawing, he made little effort. He despised his teachers – with one exception, Leopold Poetsch who taught him history. Later, in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler made the remarkable assertion that his 'whole future life had been determined' by Poetsch's teaching. 'I then and there became a young rebel. But who could have studied German history under such a teacher and not become an enemy of the State whose rulers exercised such a disastrous influence on the destinies of the German nation?'¹² All Hitler's comments in *Mein Kampf*

about the early formation of his ideas are suspect. It is likely that his reference to the influence history had on him was exaggerated to make it appear that he had always held resolute ideas.

His father's death in 1903 lifted any pressure Adolf had been under to apply himself and he left school in 1905 poorly qualified. Between that time and his mother's death in 1907, the teenage Hitler lived a carefree but unfocused existence in his mother's flat in Linz. He did no work of any significance, nor did he need to since his mother and sister indulged him by providing for all his needs.

In Vienna

The year 1907 proved important for Adolf Hitler. Having reached the age of eighteen, he began receiving the legacy his father had left him, 650 Kronen (approximately £30), a sum supplemented by a further 240 Kronen from his mother who drew it from her civil service widow's pension.¹³ With this money, which was sufficient to live on for about a year, Hitler left his ailing mother and moved to Vienna, intent on becoming a student at the Academy of Art. Convinced that he would pass the entrance exam 'quite easily', he was made 'crestfallen' by his rejection in October.¹⁴ The notes made by his examiners tell their own story:

The following gentlemen submitted unsatisfactory drawings or were not admitted to the examination: ... Adolf Hitler, Braunau a. Inn, 20 April 1889, German, Catholic. Father – Civil Servant, upper rank, four grades in Realschule. Few heads [submitted]. Sample drawing unsatisfactory.¹⁵

Despite being turned down for the Academy, Hitler stayed in Vienna for the best part of the next seven years. In *Mein Kampf*, he described this as a time for him of poverty and privation, but one for which he was grateful. 'It hardened me', he wrote, 'and enabled me to be as tough as I now am.'¹⁶ His claim needs qualification. Reinhold Hanisch, a fellow frequenter of the hostels for the homeless in which Hitler stayed, drew a different picture, not of a man toughened by experience and hard work but of someone who was too idle to seek employment. If Hitler was hungry and down at heel, said Hanisch, it was largely because he chose to be.

Although Hanisch was himself a drifter, he tried to persuade Hitler that they should look for work together. However, aside from a little snow clearing in the winter months, Hitler was not prepared to take up the harder physical labour, such as ditch digging, that Vienna offered casual workers. Hanisch observed that Hitler 'was much too weak for hard physical work. I have never seen him do any hard work.'¹⁷

Hanisch is particularly intriguing in regard to his comments on Hitler's attitude towards the Jews. There is no doubt that at the beginning of the twentieth century anti-Semitism was a pervading feature of Viennese life. Two prominent figures dominated the political debate in Vienna at this time, Georg Ritter von Schönerer and Karl Lueger, and both were fiercely anti-Semitic. Schönerer led the Pan-German Party; he condemned the Austro-Hungarian empire as a decaying relic and asserted that only by becoming part of Germany could Austria save its great capital Vienna from being swamped by the inferior races of whom the Jews were the most destructively active. Lueger was the influential Christian-Socialist mayor of Vienna, who believed his city was being deliberately bankrupted by corrupt Jewish financiers.

Yet, according to Hanisch, Hitler during his Vienna days had not been notably anti-Semitic. Indeed, a number of the shelters for the homeless in which Hitler stayed were Jewish foundations and Hanisch refers to Hitler's making friends with a number of the Jewish inmates and gratefully borrowing small sums of money from them. Hanisch's conclusion was that 'Hitler was by no means a Jew hater. He became one afterward'.¹⁸ According to Hanisch, what came first for Hitler was his adopted German nationalism to which he added a cultivated hatred of the Jews as an act of expediency. 'He used to say even then that the end sanctions the means, so he incorporated anti-Semitism into his program as a powerful slogan'.¹⁹

The description given by Hanisch cannot be taken as gospel. A convicted thief and fraudster, he does not excite confidence in him as a chronicler. The probability is that he had been jaundiced by what he regarded as Hitler's failure to pull his weight in a small-scale business venture they had set up together. The plan had been for them to draw and paint Viennese scenes which would then be printed and sold as postcards. Hanisch complained, however, that

Hitler, being too idle, and also being jealous of his partner's superior draughtsmanship, did not co-operate fully and the scheme fell through. But it would be wrong to dismiss Hanisch as totally untrustworthy. The speed with which Himmler's Gestapo later suppressed Hanisch's account, published in 1937, suggested that there may well have been some truth in it. If that were the case, Hitler clearly had every reason to prevent its publication since Hanisch's depiction of him in Vienna as a disorganised idler with a soft spot for Jews contradicted the established image of him as the purposeful future Führer destined to save the German nation and purify the Aryan race.²⁰

Against Hanisch's view has to be set the comments of August Kubizek, who had been Hitler's companion in Linz. He described Hitler as having already been anti-Jewish when he went to Vienna, attributing this to the influence of his father, Alois, and the teachers at his *Realschule* in Linz, who had all been outspoken anti-Semites. However, since Kubizek wrote his account in the 1930s at the request of the Nazis, it is of questionable accuracy.²¹

What comments such as Kubizek's have done is help create a received view that Hitler's anti-Semitism intensified during his pre-1914 Vienna days. There is a passage in *Mein Kampf* in which he described his repulsion when he first came across a group of Jews: 'the revolting feature was that beneath their unclean exterior one suddenly perceived the moral mildew of the chosen race ... Here was a pestilence, a moral pestilence, with which the public was being infected.'²² It is a chilling passage but the incident it describes is unlikely to have happened. *Mein Kampf* was a rewriting of the story. It was Hitler's attempt to portray his political progress as a matter of clarity and logic. According to his own version, as soon as he became politically conscious in Vienna and realised that the Jews were a destructive force, he became committed to an anti-Semitic crusade to save society from their malignant embrace. His anti-Semitism gave definition to his politics.

However, this is the Hitler of 1924 speaking; it is not the Hitler of earlier years. More recent studies, particularly those of Brigitte Hamann, show that Hitler did not involve himself in the racial politics of Vienna. This is hardly the picture of a man with a burning sense of mission. Hans Mommsen, in a foreword to the 2010 edition of Brigitte Hamann's major work on this theme,

observes that during his time in Vienna Hitler did not join any of the myriad nationalist anti-Semitic associations that existed there, remaining 'completely passive and inactive' and showing no sign of the 'compact Weltanschauung' which he later claimed to have possessed.²³ Indeed, the evidence available suggests Hitler was far from being openly anti-Semitic at this stage; he had Jewish companions, stayed in Jewish hostels, and was even known to take the Jewish side in arguments. It is also significant that Hitler was to exhibit no signs of a pronounced anti-Semitism during his war service.²⁴

In regard to the formation of Hitler's racist attitudes, there is also a commonly held assumption that his love of the music of Richard Wagner helped develop his distaste for the Jews, the notion being that Hitler was attracted to the anti-Semitic elements in the composer's works. It is certainly true that he was enraptured by Wagner's operas. Paula Hitler recalls that her brother had already become an opera buff in Linz, where he attended thirteen performances of *Götterdämmerung*.²⁵ He continued the practice in Vienna, queuing for hours for the cheapest standing places in the State Opera house. He saw Beethoven's *Fidelio* and the main Verdi and Puccini repertoire, but his passion remained Wagner, whose *Tristan und Isolde* he later recalled having seen 'thirty to forty times' while in Vienna.²⁶ Joachim Fest, a distinguished German biographer, built on this to suggest that Hitler took Wagner as his 'ideological mentor' finding in his works 'the granite foundations' for his *Weltanschauung*.²⁷ However, this is to predate Hitler's adoption of Wagner as a political inspiration. There is little in Hitler's early years to indicate that he interpreted the music as an ideological statement. Kubizek noted, indeed, that Wagner's operas transported Hitler from hard reality 'into a mystical dream world'.²⁸ It is also noticeable that even in *Mein Kampf* Hitler makes no direct allusion to Wagner's being a political influence on him. When he does refer to 'the Bayreuth Master', for whom his 'youthful enthusiasm ... knew no limits', it is to point out that the wonder he felt at the music confirmed his decision to avoid the humdrum by defying his father's command that he enter the civil service.²⁹

Notwithstanding Hitler's later claim that he lived in penury in Vienna, the truth was that after 1909, when his sister Paula began to pass on the settlement left to him by his mother, he did not have to work. The income from the legacy was on a par with the