

Hitler's early life and his early political career.

Hitler's early years

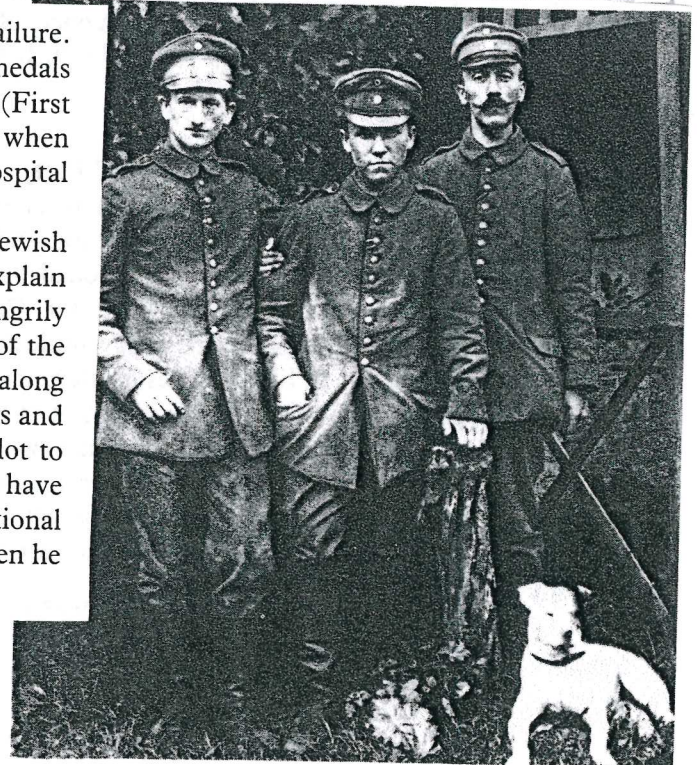
Hitler's rise was all the more remarkable in view of the setbacks of his early life. Born in 1889, the son of an Austrian customs official, Hitler did badly at secondary school and at the age of 18 left for Vienna, determined to become an artist. Twice he applied to take the entrance exam to the Academy of Fine Arts and twice he was turned down because his samples of work were not good enough. His money ran out and he sank into poverty; he was forced to give up his rented apartment room for a bed in a men's hostel. Moody and friendless, he eked out a living by selling his own copies of pictures of Vienna to dealers and engravers. In 1913 he left Vienna for Munich and a year later he was fighting for Germany in the Great War.

Hitler (ringed) among the huge Munich crowd celebrating the outbreak of war on 1 August 1914



The war gave Hitler the chance to escape from poverty and failure. He lived dangerously and fought with courage, being awarded medals for bravery which included the rare distinction of the Iron Cross (First Class). But his new found sense of purpose in life was shattered when he heard the news of Germany's collapse as he lay in hospital recovering his sight after a British gas attack.

To Hitler, Germany's surrender was further proof of the Jewish master-plan for world conquest. Searching for scapegoats to explain his own failure in Vienna before the war, Hitler had hungrily swallowed the crude anti-Semitism (hostility towards the Jews) of the gutter press. He returned to Munich after the war, convinced, along with many other German nationalists, that the Weimar democrats and the Communist revolutionaries were part of a sinister Jewish plot to overthrow the German race. These fanatical beliefs would not have altered the course of history had not Hitler possessed exceptional political talents which he finally turned to use at the age of 30 when he decided to join the German Workers' Party.



Hitler (right) as a soldier in 1916



*Hitler at school
in 1899, aged ten*

Hitler was not a German. He was born in Austria and spent the first twenty-four years of his life there. He left school at sixteen after failing his examinations and left home at eighteen to live in Vienna, the capital of Austria. Without a job and without qualifications, he ended up in a hostel for down-and-outs. A tramp in the hostel remembered his arrival:

‘On the very first day there sat next to the bed that had been allotted to me a man who had nothing on except an old torn pair of trousers – Hitler. His clothes were being cleaned of lice, since for days he had been wandering about without a roof and in a terribly neglected condition.’

That was in 1909. For the next four years Hitler scraped a living by painting postcards and selling them in the streets. Then he left Vienna in a hurry to get out of doing national service in the army. He went across the border into Germany and settled down in the city of Munich.

Although he had dodged his army service in peacetime, Hitler was infected by the war fever of 1914. He volunteered to serve in the German army and quickly proved to be a brave soldier, doing the dangerous work of carrying messages across the trenches. He won six medals for his bravery, including an Iron Cross First Class, the highest award a German soldier could win. Yet he never got above the rank of corporal.

The war ended for Hitler in October 1918 when he was temporarily blinded by mustard gas in a British attack. It was while he was in hospital recovering his sight that he was told of Germany’s surrender, and cried in despair.

Hitler stayed in the army after the end of the war.

Based in Munich, he worked as a V-man – an army spy whose job was to investigate new political groups and parties to find out whether they were dangerous to the government. One group he investigated was not at all dangerous, for it had only six members and funds of about 40 pence. But he liked many of its ideas and joined it in 1919. It was called the **German Workers’ Party**.

Political success

Hitler quickly changed the German Workers’ Party from a run-down debating club into an organisation that had mass support in Munich. He was a spell-binding public speaker and thousands flocked to his meetings to hear him attack the targets of nationalist fury: the Weimar politicians, the treaty-makers of Versailles, the Communists and, above all, the Jews. Hitler kept the message simple and played on the emotions of his audience. In his speeches he started slowly, gradually working himself and the audience up into a state of anger against the ‘enemies’ of Germany before reaching a climax with his appeal for unity to save the German Fatherland. After a two-hour volley of words, Hitler left the rostrum soaking in sweat while the crowd poured out into the night singing patriotic songs and shouting anti-Semitic slogans.

By 1923 Hitler was in absolute control of the Party, now renamed the National Socialist German Workers’ Party, or Nazi Party. It had its own 25 point programme, its own distinctive emblem of the swastika, a party newspaper and a private army – the brown-shirted storm-troopers or SA who controlled the streets of Munich.

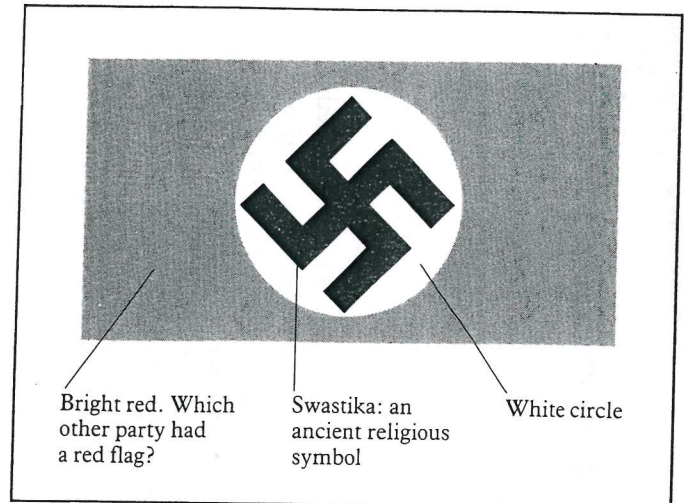
The Nazi Party, as some people mockingly called it, grew rapidly in 1920 and had 3000 members by the end of the year. A specially designed flag helped to attract attention – a **swastika**, or crooked cross, on a white and red background.

The Nazi Party

Before long, Hitler was running the party. He put advertisements in newspapers, stuck posters on walls and held meetings in public halls and beer cellars. Soon he was getting big audiences at his meetings, for he was an interesting and powerful speaker. One historian, Z.A.B. Zeman, has worked out that the frequency of his normal speaking voice was 228 vibrations per second, compared with 200 per second in the voice of an average man speaking in anger. This meant that 'the onslaught on the eardrums of the audience was tremendous'. It also meant that he could get his message across without microphones.

And what was his message? In 1920 he re-named the party the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, or **National Socialist German Workers' Party** and issued a twenty-five-point programme describing its aims. These are some of the twenty-five points:

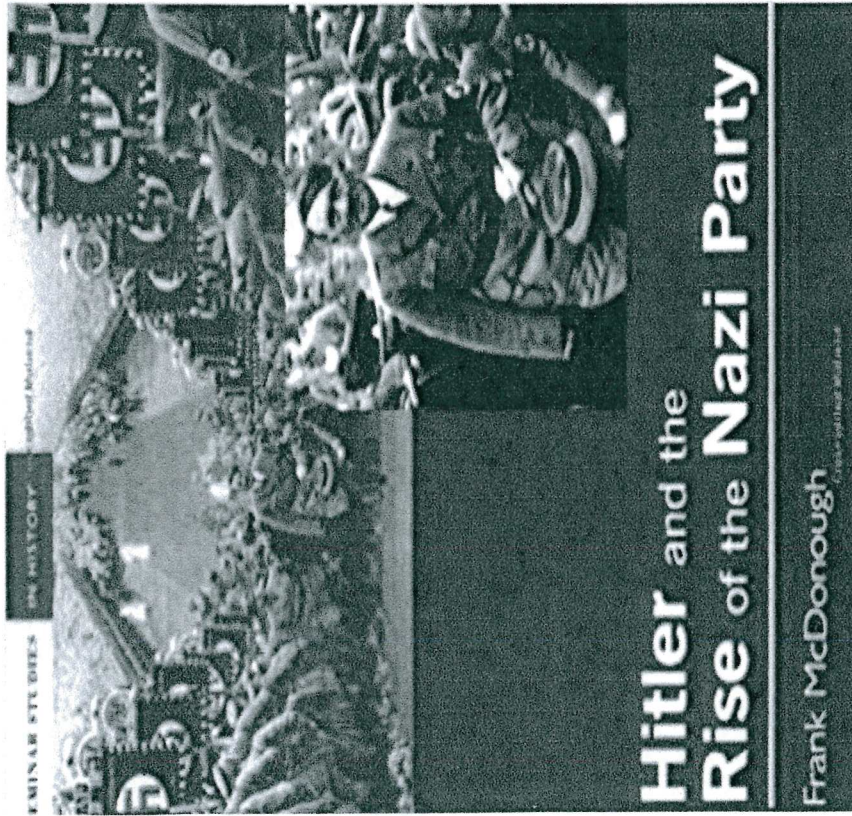
1. We demand the union of all Germans to form a greater Germany . . .
2. We demand the abolition of the Peace Treaties of Versailles and Saint Germain.
3. We demand land and territory for the nourishment of our people . . .
4. None but those of German blood . . . may be members of the German nation. No Jew, therefore, may be a member of the German nation.
11. We demand the abolition of incomes unearned by work.
14. We demand profit-sharing in the big industries.
15. We demand a generous development of provision for old age.
16. We demand the creation and support of a healthy middle class.
25. We demand the creation of a strong central government in Germany.'



Nazi meetings were usually rowdy and violent. Members of opposing parties often came to heckle and boo so, in 1921, Hitler set up a 'Gymnastic and Sports Division' to deal with such people. It was really just a cover name for ex-soldiers in the party who liked a fight, especially with Communists. Hitler described a fierce battle between them and Communists at a meeting in a beer hall in 1921:

'A few angry cries, and a man suddenly leaped on a chair and yelled "Liberty!" In a few seconds the hall was filled with a yelling and howling mob, above which countless beer pots flew like howitzer shells. Chair legs smashed, glasses shattered. . . . My storm troops, as they were called from that day on, attacked. Like wolves they rushed in parties of eight or ten on the enemy and began gradually to sweep them out of the hall. . . . It had all taken about five and twenty minutes, by which time we were masters of the situation.'

So the Nazi Party was becoming more than just a political party. It had its own private army of thugs to beat up anyone who disagreed with them. Hitler re-named them the *Sturm Abteilung* (Storm Troopers) or **SA**.



The following chapter is taken from this book. It gives a detailed and in depth account of Hitler's early life and his early political career. This book is typical of the books you will use to study A Level History and gives you an idea of what to expect from a specialist A Level text written by an academic historian.

ADOLF HITLER: PERSONALITY AND EARLY LIFE

Adolf Hitler is the most recognisable historical figure of the twentieth century. No one else has aroused so much historical controversy, or given rise to such morbid popular fascination. It is, indeed, impossible to conceive of German history – and world history – taking the same course if Adolf Hitler had never lived. Yet the available evidence for Hitler's early life is extremely fragmented. Hitler's own account, offered in his book *Mein Kampf*, is largely inaccurate, while the very few people who knew him in the formative years of his life offered their evidence many years later, which no doubt coloured their judgement.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Adolf Hitler, who was baptised as a Catholic, was born at 6.30 p.m. on 20 April 1889 at the Gasthof zum Pommer, in the Austrian town of Braunau am Inn, close to the Austro-German frontier. Hitler was the fourth child of the union between Alois Hitler and Klara Poelzl. Their first three children – Gustav, Ida and Otto – all died before any of them had reached the age of three. Two more children were born after Adolf: Edmund (born in 1894, but died in 1900) and Paula, born in 1896, who lived into old age. The survival of only two children out of a family of six was by no means abnormal in the context of the times.

Alois Hitler, Hitler's father, was born on 27 June 1837, in the small village of Strones. He was actually christened Alois Schicklgruber, and was the only son of Maria Anna Schicklgruber, the daughter of Johann Schicklgruber. The family were peasants, who had farmed land for several generations in the Waldviertel, a hilly and wooded region in the lower north-west of Austria, on the border of Bohemia. At the time of his birth, Alois Hitler was termed an 'illegitimate child' because the space allotted to the father on the birth register was left blank.

A great deal of historical speculation, much of it idle and fanciful, has been spent attempting to explain who Adolf Hitler's grandfather really was.