



CHAPTER 1

In 1908, a young man wandered aimlessly around Austria, a country bordering Germany. Penniless and with no real direction in his life, the young man slept in homeless shelters and ate in soup kitchens. Now and then he would work an odd job to earn just enough money to get by, but he preferred to think of himself as a misunderstood artist. Finally he applied to a famous art school in Vienna, certain that his talent would get him accepted. Although he was a high-school dropout who had barely passed his classes, he didn't think any of that would matter at an art institute.

Much to his surprise, however, the school rejected his application. When the young man stormed into the school, demanding an explanation, school officials did not try to soften the blow. They said that while some of his drawings of buildings were decent, his drawings of people looked lifeless and lacked any kind of human warmth. This made the young man bitter and angry, and he often complained to his few friends that no one appreciated

true talent anymore. If his friends disagreed with him even slightly, he would often scream at them and then refuse to ever speak to them again.

His dreams of being an artist ruined, the young man turned his attention elsewhere. He had always been fascinated by Germany, the powerful country next door to Austria. Germans were tall and strong—and fiercely proud of their country and their ancestry; they had a history of not letting anyone push them around or tell them they weren't good enough. To the young man, there was nothing more admirable than this. And so he studied and read everything he could find about German leaders and German history.

In particular, the young man became obsessed with the idea that other races and other Europeans were ruining the “pure” race of German people. He pored over writings that used half-truths, exaggerations, and outright lies to convince readers that only those of pure German ancestry were good enough to remain in Germany. This kind of writing is known as “propaganda,” and its main goal is to brainwash people into believing something that isn't true. The young man had originally been interested in the truths of German history, but the more propaganda he read, the more interested he became in the lies. Worse still, he believed them.

Beware the Jewish Snake! The young man carried a pamphlet with this title as he wandered the

streets of Vienna. Who were these horrible Jews? he wondered, somewhat bewildered, as he stared into strangers' faces. When he had made a meager living selling his art, one of his main buyers had been a Jewish man who had even become a friend. The Austrians were more welcoming of Jews and people from other cultures and other countries than the German people were. In Austria, thousands of Jews lived happy, successful lives and offered a great deal to their communities as doctors, lawyers, tradesmen, and teachers.

But now the young man had read enough propaganda to come to believe that Jews were not what they presented themselves to be. It was all a cover-up. The literature and pamphlets pointed out again and again that it was the Jews who had killed Jesus Christ, and though they may seem kind and thoughtful, they have a hidden plan. In fact, the book that the young man had just finished reading warned that Jews were attempting to take over the entire world! In one pamphlet, pictures of "typical Jews" had been drawn—scowling, big-nosed, wicked-looking men with long beards and evil eyes. Now the young man spotted a few older men who looked a bit like this, and he followed them, observing them carefully and remembering all the propaganda he had read.

Before long, the young man came to a conclusion that he would often say aloud. At first he would say it to his few friends, trembling with

anger if they disagreed. Later, he would declare it a bit more confidently to political groups gathered in beer halls. And eventually he would stand before many thousands of Germans who would cheer him as he shrieked in his high-pitched and furious voice: “The Jews are definitely a race, but they are not human!”

The young man’s name was Adolf Hitler.

Hitler’s love affair with Germany continued for some years, and by the time he was 24, he left Austria for Germany. Hitler was disgusted that many Austrians didn’t seem to care if those of different races, religions, and nationalities settled in their country. How, Hitler wondered, could Austrians keep their race pure if they mingled with outsiders? In time, Hitler decided he would go to “the Fatherland,” as he called Germany, and find a way to show his support of it. He would get his first chance in 1914.

On June 28, 1914, a young terrorist from Serbia (a country south of Austria) killed the heir to Austria’s throne after years of disagreements between the two countries about land rights. Immediately, Germany pushed Austria to declare war on Serbia. Then one country after another declared war. Russia joined in the fight to support Serbia, and then Germany jumped aboard to defend Austria. France and England, both friends of the Russians, soon joined the war to help their ally. And when

German submarines, known as “U-boats,” attacked American ships that were taking food and supplies to British armies, the United States mobilized against Germany. It seemed as if the whole world was at war—and it was. This was World War I.

Hitler was so thrilled with the idea of becoming a German soldier that he literally fell to his knees, wept, and thanked the heavens when Germany declared war on Russia. Immediately, Hitler enlisted. All the young German soldiers were certain that this would be a short war; after all, Germany was so powerful, and their military was enormous. Who could possibly beat them?

World War I was not a short war, however. It dragged on for four years, and millions of people were killed. It was a particularly deadly war, because it was the first one in which new vehicles, such as tanks and airplanes, were utilized, as well as the first war where both sides used poisonous gas extensively. Machine-gun fire was so feared that many soldiers dug deep trenches into the ground to give them some kind of protection from the constant rain of bullets. This “trench warfare” was muddy and lice-infested. And, depending on the time of year, it was either scorchingly hot or numbingly cold.

Hitler, by all accounts, was an odd soldier. He dressed sloppily and avoided friendships with other soldiers. When there was the opportunity to take a break and go drinking in a beer hall with his fellow soldiers, Hitler remained behind, choosing instead

to read German histories in his tent. (Once, when he was younger, Hitler had gotten drunk with friends. He had awakened the next morning sprawled on the side of the road, an old farmer kicking him to see if he was alive. From that point on, Hitler never touched alcohol again.) As always, Hitler was quick-tempered and inclined to cut off anyone who disagreed with him on even the smallest matters.

Although he was a loner, Hitler was dedicated to the war. He never complained, never took leave when it was offered, and never shied away from the duties assigned to him, regardless of how dangerous they might be. And, miraculously, time and time again he avoided getting injured—even in the deadliest battles. Hitler was awarded medals for his service and bravery. However, he was never promoted to the rank of an officer. Because of his unfriendliness, other officers felt he would not have the ability to inspire and lead soldiers.

Then Hitler's amazing luck at avoiding war injuries ran out. In 1916, he was shot in the leg, an injury that would give him a lifelong limp. After recuperating, he visited Berlin, the capital of Germany, and was stunned by how many people were speaking out against the war. Hitler glared furiously at those who were criticizing the German and Austrian troops' efforts. Sometimes he even trailed them to see where they lived. What Germans *dared* to be foes of the German army? Hitler thought he knew.

“It is the Jews and the gypsies!” he snarled to an acquaintance one evening. “It is those who have come here from somewhere else. They have no sense of national pride!”

To Hitler, “nationalism,” total and unconditional support of one’s country, was more important than anything else. He scorned the gypsies, mostly from Romania, who were a free-spirited people that roamed throughout Europe. Because they spoke their own language and were dark-skinned, Hitler felt they had no right to live among the “pure” Germans he so admired. And the Jews, Hitler often noted, were a people who had been on the move for thousands of years. Throughout history, they had been expelled from more than seventy-five countries. They belonged nowhere, Hitler firmly believed. And they most certainly did not belong in Germany.

Angry and disillusioned by the indifference of many Berliners, Hitler returned to the war as soon as he was well enough. He still believed Germany would win the war, and he wanted to be on the frontlines when they did. However, eighteen months after returning to the war, he was temporarily blinded by poisonous gas and was once again hospitalized in Germany.

Hitler strained to hear the whispers and low conversations the medical staff carried on about the war. “Disaster . . . must surrender . . . doomed . . . the end.” Although Hitler refused to believe

that Germany was losing, one bitter November morning, an elderly pastor walked into the hospital and announced the news.

“Germany and Austria have fallen,” he said quietly. “The war is over.”

Hitler clenched his hands into fists. His sight was returning, but he felt no joy in it. He hated thinking of his beloved Germany in defeat, imagining its people broken and discouraged.

“There followed terrible days and even worse nights,” Hitler would later write about that time. “I knew that all was lost. . . . In these nights hatred grew in me, hatred for those responsible for this deed.”

Germany had been soundly defeated. Now, adding insult to injury, they were going to be punished for starting a war that had killed millions of people and had caused great destruction. Furthermore, the German government would not be allowed to participate in the drawing up of the punishment—France, England, and the United States would decide what was best.

Germany’s fate was outlined in a document called the Treaty of Versailles. The first order of business was to make certain that Germany would never again be able to start a war. Doing this was easy enough: simply strip Germany of its military power. The Germans had had eleven million soldiers during World War I. Now they were forced to reduce that

to a laughable 100,000. All the new weapons, such as submarines, fighter planes, and battleships, were taken out of Germany.

Next, Germany was forced to give up lands it had taken over and return them to France and Poland. Finally, Germany was slapped with a gigantic fine in order to repay its European enemies for damage that had been done to their countries during the war. Some of this repayment was in the form of resources, such as coal and agricultural products. The German government was instructed to pay the equivalent of nearly thirty-three billion dollars, an astronomical sum in 1919.

The German government could not refuse to meet any of the demands and could not stall in hopes of buying more time. Doing so could mean losing Germany entirely. Many felt that the main goal of the Treaty of Versailles was to humiliate and embarrass Germany in front of the entire world. That goal was achieved.

As can be imagined, many Germans were extremely bitter about this turn of events. The war had left most Germans poor, ragged, and defeated, and now things were about to get even worse.

There was, possibly, no one angrier than Adolf Hitler. Not only was Hitler angry at the Jews, who he felt had secretly worked together to bring Germany to ruin; he was also very upset with the German government. In his opinion, the government had been too quick to agree to surrender. He believed

the government should have fought to the death! Anything other than that was cowardly, and, to Adolf Hitler, there was no room for cowardice in Germany. It was time for change. And it was at this point that Hitler began thinking that, just maybe, he was the man destined to make that change.

It is, perhaps, hard to imagine how an unfriendly, bitter man with a limp in his walk and a chip on his shoulder could ultimately become one of the most powerful and most feared leaders in the entire world.

It all began with a speech.

One evening, Hitler decided to visit a meeting of the German Workers' Party, a political group that, like Hitler, was unhappy with the current German government. Hitler sat quietly in the back of the room, listening to different speakers. He was not particularly impressed by any of them, but as he stood up to leave, a young man began presenting the idea of splitting up parts of Germany and turning the parts into separate countries. Hitler stopped in his tracks. *Divide Germany?* Hitler shook with rage and burst out in anger against the man who had spoken.

The entire room turned to listen. Amazingly, Hitler spoke for nearly twenty minutes, and no one interrupted. In fact, the group sat spellbound, drawn in by this stranger's hypnotic glare, his fiery words, and his emotional, almost hysterical, voice.

When Hitler finished with a flourish and turned abruptly to leave, one of the members rushed over to him and handed him a small book that contained the group's beliefs and goals.

"I hope you will read this, sir. We could use somebody with your passion," the member said politely.

Hitler dismissed him with a harsh laugh. Why would he care about this group's ideas? Nonetheless, he took the book.

Much later that night, Adolf Hitler placed the book carefully on his bookshelf. He had begun reading it reluctantly, but now he had read every word. He was amazed by how similar the beliefs of the German Workers' Party were to his own. The party saw a future where the military would be returned to its previous glory, and where Germans would be bursting with nationalist pride. And, to Hitler's great approval, the party agreed that "undesirables," the Jews, had no place in Germany.

Hitler sat up the rest of the night thinking. A small political party that shared his beliefs was already in place. It would require immense work and strong, perhaps even cruel, direction, but Hitler believed he could turn this party into a movement. It would be an overpowering, thunderous political party made up of working-class people—not spineless politicians. The movement this party would create would transform Germany into the most awesome and feared country on Earth.

Perhaps he had failed at art, at friendships, and even at war, but before sunrise on that fateful night, September 12, 1919, Adolf Hitler resolved that he would not fail again. He would become a leader.

“It was the most decisive resolve of my life,” Hitler would later write. “From here there was and could be no turning back.”