

FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION



THE  
RISE AND FALL  
OF THE  
THIRD REICH

A HISTORY OF NAZI GERMANY



“One of the most important works of history of our time.” — *The New York Times*

WILLIAM L. SHIRER

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY RON ROSENBAUM

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The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich

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*I have often a bitter sorrow at the thought of the German people, which is so estimable in the individual and so wretched in the generality...*

—Goethe

*Hitler was the fate of Germany and this fate could not be stayed.*

—Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch,

Commander in Chief of the German Army, 1938–41

*A thousand years will pass and the guilt of Germany will not be erased.*

—Hans Frank, Governor General of Poland, before he  
was hanged at Nuremberg

*Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it.*

—Santayana

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## **FOREWORD**

THOUGH I LIVED and worked in the Third Reich during the first half of its

brief life, watching at first hand Adolf Hitler consolidate his power as dictator of this great but baffling nation and then lead it off to war and conquest, this personal experience would not have led me to attempt to write this book had there not occurred at the end of World War II an event unique in history.

This was the capture of most of the confidential archives of the German government and all its branches, including those of the Foreign Office, the Army and Navy, the National Socialist Party and Heinrich Himmler's secret police. Never before, I believe, has such a vast treasure fallen into the hands of contemporary historians. Hitherto the archives of a great state, even when it was defeated in war and its government overthrown by revolution, as happened to Germany and Russia in 1918, were preserved by it, and only those documents which served the interests of the subsequent ruling regime were ultimately published.

The swift collapse of the Third Reich in the spring of 1945 resulted in the surrender not only of a vast bulk of its secret papers but of other priceless

material such as private diaries, highly secret speeches, conference reports and correspondence, and even transcripts of telephone conversations of the Nazi leaders tapped by a special office set up by Hermann Goering in the Air Ministry.

General Franz Halder, for instance, kept a voluminous diary, jotted down in Gabelsberger shorthand not only from day to day but from hour to hour during the day. It is a unique source of concise information for the period between August 14, 1939, and September 24, 1942, when he was Chief of the Army General Staff and in daily contact with Hitler and the other leaders of Nazi Germany. It is the most revealing of the German diaries, but there are others of great value, including those of Dr. Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda and close party associate of Hitler, and of General Alfred Jodl, Chief of Operations of the High Command of the Armed Forces (OKW). There are diaries of the OKW itself and of the Naval High Command. Indeed the sixty thousand files of the German Naval Archives, which were captured at Schloss Tambach near Coburg, contain practically all the signals, ships' logs, diaries, memoranda, etc., of the German Navy from April 1945, when they were found, back to 1868, when the modern German Navy was founded.

The 485 tons of records of the German Foreign Office, captured by the U.S. First Army in various castles and mines in the Harz Mountains just as they were about to be burned on orders from Berlin, cover not only the

period of the Third Reich but go back through the Weimar Republic to the beginning of the Second Reich of Bismarck. For many years after the war tons of Nazi documents lay sealed in a large U.S. Army warehouse in Alexandria, Virginia, our government showing no interest in even opening the packing cases to see what of historical interest might lie within them. Finally in 1955, ten years after their capture, thanks to the initiative of the American Historical Association and the generosity of a couple of private foundations, the Alexandria papers were opened and a pitifully small group of scholars, with an inadequate staff and equipment, went to work to sift through them and photograph them before the government, which was in a great hurry in the matter, returned them to Germany. They proved a rich find.

So did such documents as the partial stenographic record of fifty-one “Fuehrer Conferences” on the daily military situation as seen and discussed at Hitler’s headquarters, and the fuller text of the Nazi warlord’s table talk with his old party cronies and secretaries during the war; the first of these was rescued from the charred remains of some of Hitler’s papers at Berchtesgaden by an intelligence officer of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division, and the second was found among Martin Bormann’s papers. Hundreds of thousands of captured Nazi documents were hurriedly assembled at Nuremberg as evidence in the trial of the major Nazi war criminals. While covering the first part of that trial I collected stacks of

mimeographed copies and later the forty-two published volumes of testimony and documents, supplemented by ten volumes of English translations of many important papers. The text of other documents published in a fifteen-volume series on the twelve subsequent Nuremberg trials was also of value, though many papers and much testimony were omitted.

Finally, in addition to this unprecedented store of documents, there are the records of the exhaustive interrogation of German military officers and party and government officials and their subsequent testimony under oath at the various postwar trials, which provide material the like of which was never available, I believe, from such sources after previous wars.

I have not read, of course, all of this staggering amount of documentation—it would be far beyond the power of a single individual. But I have worked my way through a considerable part of it, slowed down, as all toilers in this rich vineyard must be, by the lack of any suitable indexes.

It is quite remarkable how little those of us who were stationed in Germany during the Nazi time, journalists and diplomats, really knew of what was going on behind the façade of the Third Reich. A totalitarian dictatorship, by its very nature, works in great secrecy and knows how to preserve that secrecy from the prying eyes of outsiders. It was easy enough to record and describe the bare, exciting and often revolting events in the Third Reich: Hitler's accession to power, the Reichstag fire, the Roehm



Blood Purge, the Anschluss with Austria, the surrender of Chamberlain at Munich, the occupation of Czechoslovakia, the attacks on Poland, Scandinavia, the West, the Balkans and Russia, the horrors of the Nazi occupation and of the concentration camps and the liquidation of the Jews. But the fateful decisions secretly made, the intrigues, the treachery, the motives and the aberrations which led up to them, the parts played by the principal actors behind the scenes, the extent of the terror they exercised and their technique of organizing it—all this and much more remained largely hidden from us until the secret German papers turned up.

Some may think that it is much too early to try to write a history of the Third Reich, that such a task should be left to a later generation of writers to whom time has given perspective. I found this view especially prevalent in France when I went to do some research there. Nothing more recent than the Napoleonic era, I was told, should be tackled by writers of history. There is much merit in this view. Most historians have waited fifty years or a hundred, or more, before attempting to write an account of a country, an empire, an era. But was this not principally because it took that long for the pertinent documents to come to light and furnish them with the authentic material they needed? And though perspective was gained, was not something lost because the authors necessarily lacked a personal acquaintance with the life and the atmosphere of the times and with the historical figures about which they wrote?

In the case of the Third Reich, and it is a unique case, almost all of the documentary material became available at its fall, and it has been enriched by the testimony of all the surviving leaders, military and civilian, in some instances before their death by execution. With such incomparable sources so soon available and with the memory of life in Nazi Germany and of the appearance and behavior and nature of the men who ruled it, Adolf Hitler above all, still fresh in my mind and bones, I decided, at any rate, to make an attempt to set down the history of the rise and fall of the Third Reich.

“I lived through the whole war,” Thucydides remarks in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, one of the greatest works of history ever written, “being of an age to comprehend events and giving my attention to them in order to know the exact truth about them.”

I found it extremely difficult and not always possible to learn the exact truth about Hitler’s Germany. The avalanche of documentary material helped one further along the road to truth than would have seemed possible twenty years ago, but its very vastness could often be confusing. And in all human records and testimony there are bound to be baffling contradictions. No doubt my own prejudices, which inevitably spring from my experience and make-up, creep through the pages of this book from time to time. I detest totalitarian dictatorships in principle and came to loathe this one the more I lived through it and watched its ugly assault upon the human spirit. Nevertheless, in this book I have tried to be severely

objective, letting the facts speak for themselves and noting the source for each. No incidents, scenes or quotations stem from the imagination; all are based on documents, the testimony of eyewitnesses or my own personal observation. In the half-dozen or so occasions in which there is some speculation, where the facts are missing, this is plainly labeled as such. My interpretations, I have no doubt, will be disputed by many. That is inevitable, since no man's opinions are infallible. Those that I have ventured here in order to add clarity and depth to this narrative are merely the best I could come by from the evidence and from what knowledge and experience I have had.

Adolf Hitler is probably the last of the great adventurer-conquerors in the tradition of Alexander, Caesar and Napoleon, and the Third Reich the last of the empires which set out on the path taken earlier by France, Rome and Macedonia. The curtain was rung down on that phase of history, at least, by the sudden invention of the hydrogen bomb, of the ballistic missile and of rockets that can be aimed to hit the moon.

In our new age of terrifying, lethal gadgets, which supplanted so swiftly the old one, the first great aggressive war, if it should come, will be launched by suicidal little madmen pressing an electronic button. Such a war will not last long and none will ever follow it. There will be no conquerors and no conquests, but only the charred bones of the dead on an uninhabited planet.

## *Book One*

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### **THE RISE OF ADOLF HITLER**

#### **1**

### **BIRTH OF THE THIRD REICH**

ON THE VERY EVE of the birth of the Third Reich a feverish tension gripped

Berlin. The Weimar Republic, it seemed obvious to almost everyone, was about to expire. For more than a year it had been fast crumbling. General Kurt von Schleicher, who like his immediate predecessor, Franz von Papen, cared little for the Republic and less for its democracy, and who, also like him, had ruled as Chancellor by presidential decree without recourse to Parliament, had come to the end of his rope after fifty-seven days in office.

On Saturday, January 28, 1933, he had been abruptly dismissed by the aging President of the Republic, Field Marshal von [Hindenburg](#). Adolf Hitler, leader of the National Socialists, the largest political party in Germany, was demanding for himself the chancellorship of the democratic Republic he had sworn to destroy.

The wildest rumors of what might happen were rife in the capital that fateful winter weekend, and the most alarming of them, as it happened, were not without some foundation. There were reports that Schleicher, in

collusion with General Kurt von [Hammerstein](#), the Commander in Chief of the Army, was preparing a putsch with the support of the [Potsdam](#) garrison for the purpose of arresting the President and establishing a military dictatorship. There was talk of a Nazi putsch. The Berlin storm troopers, aided by Nazi sympathizers in the police, were to seize the Wilhelmstrasse, where the President's Palace and most of the government ministries were located. There was talk also of a general strike. On Sunday, January 29, a hundred thousand workers crowded into the Lustgarten in the center of Berlin to demonstrate their opposition to making Hitler Chancellor. One of their leaders attempted to get in touch with General von Hammerstein to propose joint action by the Army and organized labor should Hitler be named to head a new government.<sup>1</sup> Once before, at the time of the [Kapp putsch](#) in 1920, a general strike had saved the Republic after the government had fled the capital.

Throughout most of the night from Sunday to Monday Hitler paced up and down his room in the [Kaiserhof hotel](#) on the Reichskanzlerplatz, just down the street from the Chancellery. <sup>2</sup> Despite his nervousness he was supremely confident that his hour had struck. For nearly a month he had been secretly negotiating with Papen and the other leaders of the conservative Right. He had had to compromise. He could not have a purely Nazi government. But he could be Chancellor of a coalition government whose members, eight out of eleven of whom were not Nazis, agreed with

him on the abolition of the democratic Weimar regime. Only the aged, dour President had seemed to stand in his way. As recently as January 26, two days before the advent of this crucial weekend, the grizzly old Field Marshal had told General von [Hammerstein](#) that he had “no intention whatsoever of making that Austrian corporal either Minister of Defense or Chancellor of the Reich.” [3](#)

Yet under the influence of his son, Major Oskar von [Hindenburg](#), of Otto von Meissner, the State Secretary to the President, of Papen and other members of the palace camarilla, the President was finally weakening. He was eighty-six and fading into [senility](#). On the afternoon of Sunday, January 29, while Hitler was having coffee and cakes with Goebbels and other aides, Hermann Goering, President of the Reichstag and second to Hitler in the Nazi Party, burst in and informed them categorically that on the morrow Hitler would be named Chancellor.[4](#)

Shortly before noon on Monday, January 30, 1933, Hitler drove over to the Chancellery for an interview with Hindenburg that was to prove fateful for himself, for Germany and for the rest of the world. From a window in the Kaiserhof, Goebbels, Roehm and other Nazi chiefs kept an anxious watch on the door of the Chancellery, where the Fuehrer would shortly be coming out. “We would see from his face whether he had succeeded or not,” Goebbels noted. For even then they were not quite sure. “Our hearts are torn back and forth between doubt, hope, joy and discouragement,”

Goebbels jotted down in his diary. “We have been disappointed too often for us to believe wholeheartedly in the great miracle.” [5](#)

A few moments later they witnessed the miracle. The man with the Charlie Chaplin mustache, who had been a down-and-out tramp in Vienna in his youth, an unknown soldier of World War I, a derelict in Munich in [the first grim postwar days, the somewhat comical leader of the Beer Hall Putsch, this spellbinder who was not even German but Austrian, and who](#) was only forty-three years old, had just been administered the oath as Chancellor of the German Reich.

He drove the hundred yards to the Kaiserhof and was soon with his old cronies, Goebbels, Goering, Roehm and the other Brownshirts who had helped him along the rocky, brawling path to power. “He says nothing, and all of us say nothing,” Goebbels recorded, “but his eyes are full of tears.” [6](#)

That evening from dusk until far past midnight the delirious Nazi storm troopers marched in a massive torchlight parade to celebrate the victory.

By the tens of thousands, they emerged in disciplined columns from the depths of the Tiergarten, passed under the triumphal arch of the

[Brandenburg Gate](#) and down the Wilhelmstrasse, their bands blaring the old martial airs to the thunderous beating of the drums, their voices

bawling the new [Horst Wessel song](#) and other tunes that were as old as

Germany, their jack boots beating a mighty rhythm on the pavement, their torches held high and forming a ribbon of flame that illuminated the night

and kindled the hurrahs of the onlookers massed on the sidewalks. From a window in the palace Hindenburg looked down upon the marching throng, beating time to the military marches with his cane, apparently pleased that at last he had picked a Chancellor who could arouse the people in a traditionally German way. Whether the old man, in his dotage, had any inkling of what he had unleashed that day is doubtful. A story, probably apocryphal, soon spread over Berlin that in the midst of the parade he had turned to an old general and said, "I didn't know we had taken so many Russian prisoners."

A stone's throw down the Wilhelmstrasse Adolf Hitler stood at an open window of the Chancellery, beside himself with excitement and joy, dancing up and down, jerking his arm up continually in the Nazi salute, smiling and laughing until his eyes were again full of tears.

One foreign observer watched the proceedings that evening with different feelings. "The river of fire flowed past the French Embassy," André François-Poncet, the ambassador, wrote, "whence, with heavy heart and filled with foreboding, I watched its luminous wake. ["7](#)

Tired but happy, Goebbels arrived home that night at 3 **A.M.** Scribbling in his diary before retiring, he wrote: "It is almost like a dream ... a fairy tale ... The new Reich has been born. Fourteen years of work have been crowned with victory. The German revolution has begun! ["8](#)

The Third Reich which was born on January 30, 1933, Hitler boasted,



would endure for a thousand years,<sup>9</sup> and in Nazi parlance it was often referred to as the “Thousand-Year Reich.” It lasted twelve years and four months, but in that flicker of time, as history goes, it caused an eruption on this earth more violent and shattering than any previously experienced, raising the German people to heights of power they had not known in more than a millennium, making them at one time the masters of Europe from the Atlantic to the Volga, from the North Cape to the Mediterranean, and then plunging them to the depths of destruction and desolation at the end of a world war which their nation had cold-bloodedly provoked and during which it instituted a reign of terror over the conquered peoples which, in its calculated butchery of human life and the human spirit, outdid all the savage oppressions of the previous ages.

The man who founded the Third Reich, who ruled it ruthlessly and often with uncommon shrewdness, who led it to such dizzy heights and to such a sorry end, was a person of undoubted, if evil, genius. It is true that he found in the German people, as a mysterious Providence and centuries of experience had molded them up to that time, a natural instrument which he was able to shape to his own sinister ends. But without Adolf [Hitler](#), who was possessed of a demonic personality, a granite will, uncanny instincts, a cold ruthlessness, a remarkable intellect, a soaring imagination and—until toward the end, when, drunk with power and success, he overreached himself—an amazing capacity to size up people and situations, there

almost certainly would never have been a Third Reich.

“It is one of the great examples,” as Friedrich Meinecke, the eminent German historian, said, “of the singular and incalculable power of personality in historical life.”<sup>10</sup>

To some Germans and, no doubt, to most foreigners it appeared that a charlatan had come to power in Berlin. To the majority of Germans Hitler had—or would shortly assume—the aura of a truly charismatic leader. They were to follow him blindly, as if he possessed a divine judgment, for the next twelve tempestuous years.

### **THE ADVENT OF ADOLF HITLER**

Considering his origins and his early life, it would be difficult to imagine a more unlikely figure to succeed to the mantle of Bismarck, the Hohenzollern emperors and President Hindenburg than this singular Austrian of peasant stock who was born at half past six on the evening of April 20, 1889, in the Gasthof zum Pommer, a modest inn in the town of [Braunau am Inn](#), across the border from Bavaria.

The place of birth on the Austro–German frontier was to prove significant, for early in his life, as a mere youth, Hitler became obsessed with the idea that there should be no border between these two German-speaking peoples and that they both belonged in the same Reich. So strong and enduring were his feelings that at thirty-five, when he sat in a German prison dictating the book that would become the blueprint for the Third

Reich, his very first lines were concerned with the symbolic significance of his birthplace. *Mein Kampf* begins with these words:

Today it seems to me providential that fate should have chosen Braunau am Inn as my birthplace. For this little town lies on the boundary between two German states which we of the younger generation at least have made it our life-work to reunite by every means at our disposal.... This little city on the border seems to me the symbol of a great mission.[11](#)

Adolf Hitler was the third son of the third marriage of a minor Austrian customs official who had been born an illegitimate child and who for the first thirty-nine years of his life bore his mother's name, Schicklgruber. The name Hitler appears in the maternal as well as the paternal line. Both Hitler's grandmother on his mother's side and his grandfather on his father's side were named Hitler, or rather variants of it, for the family name was variously written as Hiedler, Huetler, Huettler and Hitler. Adolf's mother was his father's second cousin, and an episcopal dispensation had to be obtained for the marriage.

The forebears of the future German Fuehrer, on both sides, dwelt for generations in the [Waldviertel](#), a district in Lower Austria between the Danube and the borders of Bohemia and Moravia. In my own Vienna days I sometimes passed through it on my way to Prague or to Germany. It is a hilly, wooded country of peasant villages and small farms, and though

only some fifty miles from Vienna it has a somewhat remote and impoverished air, as if the main currents of Austrian life had passed it by. The inhabitants tend to be dour, like the Czech peasants just to the north of them. Intermarriage is common, as in the case of Hitler's parents, and illegitimacy is frequent.

On the mother's side there was a certain stability. For four generations Klara Poelzl's family remained on peasant holding Number 37 in the village of [Spital](#).<sup>12</sup> The story of Hitler's paternal ancestors is quite different. The spelling of the family name, as we have seen, changes; the place of residence also. There is a spirit of restlessness among the Hitlers, an urge to move from one village to the next, from one job to another, to avoid firm human ties and to follow a certain bohemian life in relations with women.

[Johann Georg Hiedler](#), Adolf's grandfather, was a wandering miller, plying his trade in one village after another in Lower Austria. Five months after his first marriage, in 1824, a son was born, but the child and the mother did not survive. Eighteen years later, while working in Duerenthal, he married a forty-seven-year-old peasant woman from the village of [Strones](#), Maria Anna Schicklgruber. Five years before the marriage, on June 7, 1837, Maria had had an illegitimate son whom she named Alois and who became Adolf Hitler's father. It is most probable that the father of Alois was Johann Hiedler, though conclusive evidence is lacking. At any