

Joseph Stalin

Background

Stalin (which means "steel" in Russian) was born on December 21, 1879, in Gori, Georgia. Stalin's parents were simple peasants, and his father supported the family as a cobbler. Stalin grew up in poverty and uncertainty. By 1900, Stalin was deeply involved in the Marxist revolutionary movement (communism) in Georgia. Following several conflicts with authorities, he was exiled to Siberia. Following his escape from Siberia, Stalin grew involved with the Bolshevik Party and became a member in 1905. In 1912, he was nominated by Lenin to the party's highest governing body, the Central Committee.

Rise to power

The Bolshevik Revolution. Stalin played an important, but not vital, part in the revolution. Lenin worked most closely with Leon Trotsky in the Bolshevik take-over of the government. After Stalin became dictator of the Soviet Union, he had history books rewritten to say that he had led the revolution with Lenin.

Stalin takes over. The Bolsheviks (Communists) won the civil war in 1920. They then began to rebuild the war-torn country. At first, Lenin and the others were unaware of Stalin's quiet plotting. But by the end of 1922, Stalin's growing power began to disturb Lenin. Lenin wrote a secret note warning that Stalin must be removed as general secretary. He wrote that Stalin was too "rude" in personal relations and abused the power of his office. Because of his illness, however, Lenin was unable to remove Stalin. Lenin died in 1924. The leading Bolsheviks finally learned of the secret note warning against Stalin, but they ignored it. They accepted Stalin's promise that he would improve his behavior. Instead, Stalin continued to build his own power. He cleverly used this power to destroy his rivals. He had become a dictator.



Dictator of the Soviet Union

The Five-Year Plan. In 1928, Stalin started the first of the Soviet Union's five-year plans for economic development. The government began to eliminate private businesses. Production of industrial machinery and farm equipment became more important, and production of clothing and household goods was neglected.

In 1929, Stalin began to collectivize Soviet agriculture. He ended private farming and transferred the control of farms, farm equipment, and livestock to the government. But the farmers resisted his order and destroyed about half of the U.S.S.R.'s livestock and much of its produce. As punishment, Stalin had millions of peasants killed or exiled. The destruction of livestock and grain caused widespread starvation. The economy moved forward, but at the cost of millions of lives.

During the 1930's, Stalin attempted to make Russian culture and the Russian language dominant throughout the U.S.S.R. The minority nationalities in the Soviet Union were subject to increasingly strict control by the government. In 1939, the Soviet Union seized a large part of Poland. In 1940, Soviet troops invaded the Baltic countries—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Stalin tried to destroy the middle classes in these countries. He set up Communist governments and joined them to the Soviet Union.

Rule by terror. Under the czars, the Russian secret police had often arrested revolutionists and sent them into exile without trial. Stalin set up a police system that was far more terrible. Millions of persons were executed or sent to labor camps. Stalin also turned over many industries to the secret police, who forced prisoners to work in them. Fear spread through the U.S.S.R. as neighbors were ordered to spy on one another. The Soviet government broke up families, and it urged children to inform on their parents to the police.

In 1935, Stalin started a purge (elimination) of most of the old Bolsheviks associated with Lenin. During the next few years, he killed anyone who might have threatened his power. He also executed thousands of other Communist Party members, including the chiefs and countless officers of the Soviet army. Stalin achieved his purpose. When he decided to cooperate with the German dictator Adolf Hitler in 1939, there was no one left to oppose his policies. Even when the Soviet Union later suffered terrible military defeats from Hitler's army, no political opposition to Stalin was possible.

Stalinism. Even after Stalin's death, many Communist governments continued to use his style of rule, which became known as Stalinism. Stalinist governments eliminate all opposition by employing terrorism—that is, by threatening or using violence to create widespread fear. These governments maintain total control of the media for propaganda and force economic production without considering market conditions or the needs of workers.

Stalin ruled by terror during most of his years as dictator. He allowed no one to oppose his decisions. Stalin executed or Stalin also was responsible for the deaths of millions of Soviet peasants who opposed his program of collective agriculture (government control of farms). Under Stalin, the Soviet Union operated a worldwide network of Communist parties. By the

time he died, Communism had spread to 11 other countries. His style of government became known as Stalinism and continued to influence many governments.

The Soviet people had cause to hate Stalin, and much of the world feared him. But he changed the Soviet Union from an undeveloped country into one of the world's great industrial and military powers. In World War II (1939-1945), the Soviet Union was an ally of the United States and the United Kingdom against Germany. But Stalin sharply opposed and, on occasion, betrayed his allies even before World War II was over. The last years that Stalin ruled the Soviet Union were marked by the Cold War, in which many non-Communist nations banded together to halt the spread of Communism. Stalin had little personal charm, and could be brutal to even his closest friends. He seemed unable to feel pity. He could not take criticism, and he never forgave an opponent. Few dictators have demanded such terrible sacrifices from their own people.

After Stalin became dictator, he had Soviet histories rewritten to make his role in past events appear far greater than it really was. In 1938, he helped write an official history of the Communist Party. Stalin had not played a leading part in the revolution of November 1917 (October by the old Russian calendar), which brought Communism to Russia. V.I. Lenin led this revolution, which is known as the October Revolution, and set up the world's first Communist government. But in his history, Stalin pictured himself as Lenin's chief assistant in the revolution.

Albert Marrin, "Stalin, Joseph," *World Book Online Americas Edition*, <http://www.worldbookonline.com/ar/?/na/ar/co/ar528360.htm>, May 2, 2003.

Benito Mussolini

Benito Mussolini, Italian prime minister (1922–43) and the first of 20th-century Europe's fascist dictators.

Background

Benito Mussolini was born in Dovis, Italy on July 29, 1883 and was the son of a blacksmith and a schoolteacher. He inherited from his father an interest in the socialist movement and a taste for political extremism. Having briefly worked as a school teacher, Mussolini fled to Switzerland to escape compulsory military service but subsequently returned to fulfill it. Afterward, he worked as a manual laborer, a left-wing agitator, and an effective editor of the official Italian Socialist Party newspaper, *Avanti!*, in 1912. He broke ranks with the party and was expelled, however, over the issue of Italian intervention in World War I and his desire for Italy to take a more active role. That rejection angered Mussolini, who rejoined the military, was wounded in 1917, and returned to civilian life committed to a new, right-wing ideology—fascism.



Rise to Power

Wounded while serving with the bersaglieri (a corps of sharpshooters) in WWI, he returned home a convinced antisocialist and a man with a sense of destiny. As early as February 1918, he advocated the emergence of a dictator—"a man who is ruthless and energetic enough to make a clean sweep"—to confront the economic and political crisis then gripping Italy. Three months later, in a widely reported speech in Bologna, he hinted that he himself might prove to be such a man. The following year the nucleus of a party prepared to support his ambitious idea was formed in Milan. In an office in Piazza San Sepolcro, about 200 socialists, restless revolutionaries, and discharged soldiers met to discuss the establishment of a new force in Italian politics. Mussolini called this force the *fasci di combattimento* ("fighting bands"), groups of fighters bound together by ties as close as those that secured the fasces of the lictors—the symbols of ancient Roman authority. So fascism was created and its symbol devised.

At rallies—surrounded by supporters wearing black shirts—Mussolini caught the imagination of the crowds. His physique was impressive, and his style of oratory was superb. His attitudes were highly theatrical, his opinions were contradictory, his facts were often wrong, and his attacks were frequently malicious and misdirected; but his words were so dramatic, his metaphors so apt and striking, his vigorous, repetitive gestures so extraordinarily effective, that he rarely failed to impose his mood.

In 1919, Mussolini founded the *Fasci di Combattimento* (Combat Groups). This movement appealed to war veterans with a program that supported government ownership of national resources and that put the interests of Italy above all others. In 1921, he transformed the Fasci into the National Fascist Party, adopting a more conservative program to gain the support of property-owning Italians. The Black Shirts, armed squads who supported Mussolini, used violence to combat anti-Fascist groups. In 1922, the Black Shirts staged a March on Rome and forced King Victor Emmanuel III to appoint Mussolini prime minister.

In 1925, Mussolini declared a dictatorship. He abolished other political parties and imposed government control on industry, schools, and the press and police. In 1929, he signed agreements that settled long-standing disputes between the government and the Roman Catholic Church. He also sought to make Italy a *corporate state*, in which the government would help resolve disputes between employers and workers. The powerful Mussolini was called *Il Duce* (The Leader).

Dictatorship

Mussolini's obvious pride in his achievement at becoming (October 31, 1922) the youngest prime minister in Italian history was not misplaced. He had certainly been aided by a favorable combination of circumstances, both political and economic; but his remarkable and sudden success also owed something to his own personality, to native instinct and shrewd calculation, to astute opportunism, and to his unique gifts as an agitator. Anxious to demonstrate that he was not merely the leader of fascism but also the head of a united Italy, he presented to the king a list of ministers, a majority of whom were not members of his party. He made it clear, however, that he intended to govern authoritatively. He obtained full dictatorial powers for a year; and in that year he pushed through a law that enabled the Fascists to cement a majority in the parliament.

The elections in 1924, though undoubtedly fraudulent, secured his personal power. Many Italians, especially among the middle class, welcomed his authority. They were tired of strikes and riots, responsive to the flamboyant techniques and

medieval trappings of fascism, and ready to submit to dictatorship, provided the national economy was stabilized and their country restored to its dignity. Mussolini seemed to them the one man capable of bringing order out of chaos. Soon a kind of order had been restored, and the Fascists inaugurated ambitious programs of public works. The costs of this order were, however, enormous. Italy's fragile democratic system was abolished in favor of a one-party state. Opposition parties, trade unions, and the free press were outlawed. Free speech was crushed. A network of spies and secret policemen watched over the population. This repression hit moderate Liberals and Catholics as well as Socialists. In 1924 Mussolini's henchmen kidnapped and murdered the Socialist deputy Giacomo Matteotti, who had become one of fascism's most effective critics in parliament. The Matteotti crisis shook Mussolini, but he managed to maintain his hold on power.

Mussolini was hailed as a genius and a superman by public figures worldwide. His achievements were considered little less than miraculous. He had transformed and reinvigorated his divided and demoralized country; he had carried out his social reforms and public works without losing the support of the industrialists and landowners; he had even succeeded in coming to terms with the papacy. The reality, however, was far less rosy than the propaganda made it appear. Social divisions remained enormous, and little was done to address the deep-rooted structural problems of the Italian state and economy. Mussolini might have remained a hero until his death had not his arrogance, his misapprehension of Italy's necessities, and his dreams of empire led him to seek foreign conquests. His eye rested first upon Ethiopia, which, after 10 months of preparations, rumors, threats, and hesitations, Italy invaded in October 1935. A brutal campaign of colonial conquest followed, in which the Italians dropped tons of gas bombs upon the Ethiopian people. Europe expressed its horror; but, having done so, did no more. The **League of Nations** imposed sanctions but ensured that the list of prohibited exports did not include any, such as oil, that might provoke a European war. If the League had imposed oil sanctions, Mussolini said, he would have had to withdraw from Ethiopia within a week. But he faced no such problem, and on the night of May 9, 1936, he announced to an enormous, expectant crowd of about 400,000 people standing shoulder to shoulder around Piazza Venezia in Rome that "in the 14th year of the Fascist era" a great event had been accomplished: Italy had its empire. This moment probably marked the peak of public support for the regime.

Italy had also found a new ally. Intent upon his own ambitions in Austria, Adolf Hitler had actively encouraged Mussolini's African adventure, and under Hitler's guidance Germany had been the one powerful country in western Europe that had not turned against Mussolini. The way was now open for the Pact of Steel—a Rome-Berlin Axis and a brutal alliance between Hitler and Mussolini that was to ruin them both. In 1938, following the German example, Mussolini's government passed shameful anti-Semitic laws in Italy that discriminated against Jews in all sectors of public and private life and prepared the way for the deportation of some 20 percent of Italy's Jews to German death camps during the war.

Adolf Hitler

Hitler, Adolf (1889-1945), ruled Germany as dictator from 1933 to 1945. He turned Germany into a powerful war machine and provoked World War II in 1939. Hitler's forces conquered most of Europe before they were defeated in 1945.

Background

Hitler was born at Brannau, Austria on April 20, 1889, the son of a German customs clerk and an Austrian peasant woman. An indifferent, sullen student, he dropped out of high school to work as an aspiring artist but failed to gain entrance into the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. The onset of World War I finally gave him an outlet to vent his anger, and he left Austria to enlist in the 16th Bavarian Infantry Regiment (German army). For four years, Hitler functioned in the dangerous role as a messenger, and he received four decorations for bravery, including the prestigious Iron Cross, First Class. At one point, he sustained serious injuries in a gas attack and spent several months recuperating. Hitler finally mustered out of the German Army in 1919 with a rank of corporal.



Rise to Power

Defeat in World War I shocked the German people. Despair and turmoil increased as the army returned to a bankrupt country. Millions of Germans could not find work. A socialist-liberal republic replaced the defeated empire.

After World War I, Germany was forced to sign the Treaty of Versailles. The treaty held Germany responsible for the war. It stripped the nation of much territory and restricted the German Army to 100,000 men. It also provided for a 15-year foreign occupation of an area of western Germany called the Rhineland. But the harshest part was the demand that Germany pay huge *reparations* (payments for war damages). The sums demanded by the treaty were so great that they made peace difficult. Nationalists, Communists, and others attacked the new government. The nationalists demanded punishment for the "criminals" who had signed the treaty.

Birth of the Nazi Party. After WWI, Hitler returned to Munich and remained in the army until March 1920. In the autumn of 1919, he began to attend meetings of a small nationalist group called the German Workers' Party. He joined the party and changed its name to the National Socialist German Workers' Party. The group became known as the Nazi Party. The Nazis called for the union into one nation of all Germans, including the Austrians and German minorities in Czechoslovakia and other countries. They demanded that citizens of non-German or Jewish origin be deprived of German citizenship, and they called for the cancellation of the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler was a skillful politician and organizer. He became leader of the Nazis and quickly built up party membership—partly by his ability to stir crowds with his speeches.

Hitler also organized a private army he called *storm troopers*. He used brown-shirted uniforms and the swastika emblem to give his party and the **storm troopers**—known as the **SA**—a sense of unity and power. The troopers fought the armies of the Communist, Social Democratic, and other parties who opposed Nazi ideas or tried to break up Nazi Party rallies. By October 1923, the storm troopers numbered 15,000 members. They had a considerable number of machine guns and rifles.

The Beer Hall Putsch. On Nov. 8, 1923, at a rally in a Munich beer hall, Hitler proclaimed a Nazi revolution, or *putsch*. The next day, he tried to seize the Bavarian government in what became known as the Beer Hall Putsch. Hitler led over 2,000 storm troopers on a march against the Bavarian government. But state police opened fire and stopped the procession, killing 16 marchers. The plot failed. Hitler was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison.

Mein Kampf. While he was imprisoned, Hitler began writing his book *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*). In the book, he stated his beliefs and his ideas for Germany's future, including his plan to conquer much of Europe. Territories lost in World War I would be recovered. Austria and parts of Czechoslovakia where Germans lived would be added to Germany. The growing German nation would seize *lebensraum* (living space) from Poland, the Soviet Union, and other countries to the east. Hitler also wrote that Germans represented a superior form of humanity. They must stay "pure," he said, by avoiding marriage to Jews and Slavs. Hitler blamed the Jews for the evils of the world. He accused them of corrupting everything of ethical and national value. He said: "By defending myself against the Jews, I am doing the Lord's work."

Rise of the Nazis. Hitler was freed about nine months after his trial. He left prison in December 1924.

Great changes had taken place in Germany during 1924. A schedule for Germany's reparations payments helped stabilize the German currency, and the nation showed signs of recovering from the war. Most people had work, homes, food, and hope for the future.

The government had outlawed the Nazis after the Beer Hall Putsch. After Hitler was released from prison, he began to rebuild his party. He gradually convinced the government that the party would act legally, and the government lifted its ban on the Nazis. Hitler won friends in small towns, in labor unions, and among farmers and a few business people and industrialists. He also set up an elite party guard, the *Schutzstaffel*, known as the SS. By 1929, though the Nazis had not yet

gained substantial voter support, their organization and discipline had made them an important minority party. On Jan. 30, 1933, Germany's president, Paul von Hindenburg named Hitler chancellor.

Dictator of Germany

Hitler had never settled for anything less than full control. He moved steadily toward dictatorship. There was no place for freedom under his government, which Hitler called the *Third Reich*.

The New Order. An emergency decree signed by Hindenburg on Feb. 4, 1933, gave the Nazis legal authority to prohibit assemblies, to outlaw newspapers and other publications, and to arrest people on suspicion of treason. The Nazis were thus able to put down much of their political opposition. Goering created an auxiliary police force made up of thousands of storm troopers and ordered them to shoot in encounters with "enemies."

On March 23, 1933, the Nazi-dominated Reichstag passed a law "for the removal of distress from the people and the state." This law, known as the Enabling Act, gave the government full dictatorial powers and, in effect, suspended basic civil and human rights for four years. When the president had signed it, Hitler had a firm "legal" basis on which to govern as he pleased. He had also destroyed the constitution through outwardly legal means.

By mid-July 1933, the government had outlawed freedom of the press, all labor unions, and all political parties except the Nazis. The *Gestapo* (secret state police) hunted down the enemies and opponents of the government. People were jailed or shot on suspicion alone. By the time Hindenburg died in August 1934, Hitler ruled Germany completely. He assumed the title *Fuhrer und Reichskanzler* (leader and reich chancellor).

The Nazis used the press, radio, and films to flood Germany with propaganda praising the *New Order*, Hitler's term for his reordering of German society and for his plans to reorder the rest of Europe. The regime applauded military training, rearmament, national pride, and industry. Jews were forced out of the civil service, universities and other schools, and the professions and managerial positions. In 1935, German Jews were declared citizens of lesser rights. Thousands left the country. Many who stayed were sent to concentration camps along with hundreds of thousands of political suspects. A person needed official permission to accept work, change jobs, move, or travel abroad. The government regulated wages, housing, and production of goods. All workers and employers were supposed to belong to the German Labor Front, which was intended to replace Germany's labor unions. Through the Labor Front, the government regulated production, wages, working hours, and leisure activities.

Hitler also set up organizations for young people between the ages of 6 and 18. These groups included the *Hitler Youth* for boys 14 years and older and the *Society of German Maidens* for girls 14 years and older. The organizations were designed to condition German children to military discipline and to win their loyalty to the Nazi government. All German children were required to join such groups from the age of 10. They wore uniforms, marched, exercised, and learned Nazi beliefs. The Nazis taught children to spy on their own families and report anti-Nazi criticism they might hear.

The road to war. From 1933 onward, Hitler prepared Germany for war. He rearmed the nation, first secretly, then in open violation of the Treaty of Versailles. No nation acted to stop him, and so Hitler's steps became bolder. Hitler planned to establish Germany as the world's leading power and to destroy the Jewish people.