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Hitler Challenges the West

As THE First World War drew to its close in 1918, after four years of bitter fighting, the German army and the people were discouraged, hungry, and miserable. Angry mobs gathered in Berlin to demand peace. Kaiser William II gave up his throne and fled to Holland, and for a while it looked as if Germany would have a Socialist revolution, for the Socialists were the strongest political party in the country.

To prevent such a revolution, the victorious Allied governments sent troops into Germany. With their approval, a republic was created, with a president and a democratic type of parliament. The Allied forces stayed in Germany until the people had quieted down; then they got out, and left the Germans to work out their own problems.

In those depressing days, everybody complained about the new government. Many wished that they had the old Kaiser back to give orders. Others wanted a Communist state, like Russia. The Germans were not used to democracy, and most of them did not like it.

One of the places where men talked loudest against the government was the ancient city of Munich. There, dozens of groups sprang up to denounce the President and parliament. One

of these groups was to play a tremendous part in history. It consisted of only a half-dozen men, who met in the back room of a tavern, in the workers' quarter of Munich. They called themselves, then, the German Workers' party. But this was the beginning of the notorious Nazi movement that shook the world.

Someone listened to the fiery speeches made in the tavern, and reported the group to the authorities. At that time, the military leaders were trying to suppress the Communists, and they decided to send someone to spy on these loud-talking men. For this task they selected a young army corporal named Adolf Hitler, who had fought in the war, and had a good military record. He was told to see what the German Workers' party was up to, and report.

Pretending to be a workman out of a job, Hitler made the acquaintance of some members of the group, won their confidence, and was allowed to attend a meeting. Thereafter, he reported to his superiors that these men were not Communists. What were they? He was not quite sure, but he liked their ideas, and went back again. Soon he was so enthusiastic that he joined the party, becoming member number 7.

HITLER GETS STARTED

Hitler had never before had a chance to make public speeches, but, like Mussolini, he was a born orator, never so happy as when he was shouting himself hoarse. His sincerity and passion impressed everyone who heard him. What he said did not matter nearly so much as how he said it. In fact, he quickly discovered that people often preferred to hear lies—the bigger the better. If a lie would help his cause, he would repeat it until he

believed it himself. Once he wrote, "The people have no idea how much they must be fooled."

He left the army, became the leader of the tiny German Workers' party, and began to devote all his time to politics. The Reichstag, or parliament, had to be abolished, he said. It was full of Liberals and Social-Democrats, whom he despised, and Communists, whom he feared. He believed in Bismarck's idea that Germany should be governed by a single master, without political parties.

THE "MASTER RACE"

Bismarck was one of his idols. Another was Frederick the Great. He used to love to read about Germany's warlike history. Then he came across a queer book, written by a Frenchman, which spoke of a race of conquerors, called "Aryans," who were said to have swept over Europe many centuries ago. Scientists know that this alleged Aryan race never existed. But Hitler loved this notion. The Germans, he decided, were "pure Aryans"—a "master race"—and all other races were inferior. Not only were the Germans a race of conquerors, but, as he put it, "Germany must some day be master of the world." This made him feel good, because he regarded himself as a German, although he had been born in Austria.

All of us like to regard our nation and our people as "the best." But as we come to know the world, we realize that there is not very much difference, after all, between one civilized nation and another. Certainly, it is absurd to think that any one modern people is a great deal better than all the rest. Americans, Germans, Spanish, French, English, Czechs, Italians,

Greeks, Swedes, Russians, Chinese, Japanese—all have their virtues and their failings.

When Hitler asserted that the Germans were the *only* nation fitted to rule, he was going back thousands of years to the ignorance of savage tribes; for that is the way primitive peoples think. The “Aryan race” was one of the biggest of Hitler’s big lies. But it was a popular lie, for the Germans, who had been defeated in war, liked to be told that in time they were going to be conquerors of the world.

How was it that a race of conquerors had lost the war? Hitler had an explanation—another big lie. Germany, he said, had been defeated from within by Socialist traitors—and also by Jews. For, from his early childhood, he had a violent hatred against people of the Jewish faith.

THOUSANDS LISTEN

Hitler knew that his best chance of becoming important was to pretend to be on the side of the common people. He shouted that he believed in Socialism. All big businesses should be owned by the people and managed by the government. Big landed estates should be taken away from the aristocrats and divided up among the poor farmers. In an effort to get people to desert the Socialists and join with him, he changed the name of his party to National Socialist German Workers’ party—which was shortened to “Nazis.”

His reputation as a speaker spread, and more and more people came to the party meetings to hear him. He began by addressing audiences of twenty. Soon he was speaking to thousands at a time. People were fascinated by him, especially the unemployed

ex-soldiers. They were miserable, and wanted somebody to blame for their misery. When he told them to blame the Jews, the Socialists, and the Communists, they were entirely willing. They were patriotic, and wanted a dream of glory. When he told them his dream of Germany’s “destiny” as master of the world, they cheered and shouted.

Money began to come in from supporters. He started a newspaper, and bought uniforms for his followers—brown shirts, instead of black shirts as in Italy. Then he formed his men into bands, and ordered them to attack meetings of striking workmen, and beat up their opponents with clubs and fists. The eyes of the world turned to Hitler. Would he, too, destroy democracy in his country?

THE FIRST ATTEMPT FAILS

In 1923, some army officers encouraged Hitler to revolt openly against the republic. He and a number of his followers met in a Munich beer hall, and then dashed out into the street to try to seize some government buildings. But the people failed to come to his aid, and the police resisted. After an exchange of shots, the Nazis fled. A court convicted Hitler of treason and sentenced him to prison for five years.

Most people thought that the failure of the “beer hall revolt” meant the end of his career. But he was still confident. While in jail he wrote a book—*Mein Kampf* or *My Battle*—in which he told the story of his life, and his ideas about politics, including his favorite big lies.

Meanwhile, his friends in the army were quietly working for him behind the scenes. They urged the politicians of the repub-

lic to let Hitler out of jail, and after eight months the government pardoned him. Once more he began to address enormous meetings all over Germany.

BONDS AND TRICKERY

Now the Nazi party grew faster than ever before—by the millions. For while Hitler was in prison, the German government had been helping his cause. To meet the great cost of the war, the government had borrowed billions of marks from the people, and had given them bonds in exchange. But the German republic was so hard up that it could no longer pay interest on these bonds.

The leading financiers of Germany then got the idea of wiping out the public debt by what is known as “inflation of the currency.” They printed vast amounts of paper money. In effect, they told the people who owned bonds, “The German government owes you such and such a sum. Very well, here is paper money in that amount. Don’t blame us if it isn’t worth anything. We’re doing the best we can.”

The main reason why the printed pieces of paper that we call money are valuable is, of course, our faith that our government will, if asked, exchange the paper for gold, or silver, or some other desirable thing. In Germany, at the time we are speaking about, nobody had such faith. There was very little gold and silver in the treasury, and the government was printing billions and billions of paper marks.

As soon as the German people realized what was happening, paper money lost all its value. A man might have a million paper marks in his pocket and yet be unable to buy a cup of

coffee. Millions of Germans who had lent all their money to the government received meaningless pieces of paper in return. They were ruined.

Having wiped out its debt to German bondholders, the government was able to borrow a large sum from some American bankers. Then the government got rid of all its worthless money, and issued some new money in which people had faith, and which could be used to buy things.

The politicians were well pleased, because they were able to keep their power over the German government. But millions felt that they had been tricked and cheated out of their money, and they hated the politicians and the republican government.

THE INFLATION HELPS HITLER

It is easy to see how all this benefited Adolf Hitler. He made speech after speech attacking the German republican politicians and the American bankers. He promised to avenge the German people by destroying the people who had ruined them.

Many Germans were eager to hate somebody and to get revenge for their suffering. They cheered when Hitler raved against politicians and foreign bankers and Socialists and Jews all together. They did not mind being confused, because Hitler was so exciting.

In fact, one of the strongest reasons for Hitler’s success is that he did not ask his followers to think. He said, “Trust me, and all will be well.” And they did. They put their faith in him blindly, because then they did not have to figure things out for themselves. They said, “Our great leader Adolf Hitler will do our thinking for us. All we have to do is obey.”

But Hitler could not get control of the government until some big business men decided that he was their best hope for fighting the labor unions. Just as Italian millionaires had turned to Mussolini, so these German men of wealth promised to help Hitler come to power if he would break up the unions.

Hitler was willing to make any kind of deal in order to get power. The old program of his party, with its socialistic ideas, was thrown overboard, and he turned violently against the labor unions. Workmen should have nothing to say about the wages they were paid, he said; that was for the owners of business to decide.

This pleased the German conservatives, but it upset some of the older members of Hitler's party. To them he said, "If you don't like it, get out!" Finally, in 1933, the aged president of the German republic, Hindenburg, appointed Hitler as chancellor, or prime minister.

THE NAZIS START A FIRE

According to the law of the republic, before Hitler could take office as chancellor a new Reichstag would have to be elected and give its approval. Hitler was afraid that the German people would not give the Nazis a big enough vote in the elections. How could he assure victory?

One night, the great hall of the Reichstag burst into flames. Hitler cried that the fire had been started by the Communists and was proof of a revolutionary plot. A great conspiracy to destroy the country had been uncovered in the nick of time, he said. Thousands of Communists were arrested.

All this frightened the people so much that, when the elections were held, the Nazis received nearly half of all the votes cast. This was enough to give Hitler control of the Reichstag.

Then the Nazis held a trial of some Communists. And a curious thing happened. The evidence showed that the accused men had nothing to do with the fire. Soon all the world realized that the Nazis themselves had deliberately burned down the Reichstag in order to make sure that Hitler would win the election.

THE NAZIS TAKE POWER

Everything went as Hitler had planned.

The Reichstag voted to make him dictator. When old Hindenburg died, the office of president was abolished. The army took an oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler, *der Führer*, chancellor of the Reich.

The labor unions were dissolved, and their money was taken away. Workers' wages began to fall, and hours of work to grow.

All political parties except the Nazis were disbanded and forbidden to hold meetings. Nothing could be printed or shown in a motion picture, or spoken on the radio, unless the Nazis approved.

Scientists, writers, and artists who opposed Hitler, including many of the country's most famous men, fled for their lives. Those who did not get out in time went to prison.

A great secret police force, the *Gestapo*, began to search out every man suspected of being against Hitler, and put the victims into concentration camps. Liberals, Socialists, and Jews filled

these concentration camps by the hundreds of thousands. Many of them were systematically beaten and tortured. Thousands were killed and crippled. Others went mad.

THE BLOOD PURGE

Now something happened that shows just how Hitler's mind worked. A year after taking power, he realized that a great many of his own Nazi supporters, including some of his best friends, did not like the things he was doing.

One day in 1934 Hitler sent cordial telegrams to hundreds of these dissatisfied Nazis, asking them to meet him at a certain place. As they got off the trains, they were amazed to find regiments of Hitler's private guards waiting to arrest them. Without any warning or any chance to speak they were led to a fortress. Twenty of them, pale and bewildered at this treachery, were forced to stand up against a wall. A platoon of soldiers leveled their rifles. The commanding officer cried, "This is done at the wish of *der Führer*. Heil Hitler! Fire!"

A volley rang out, and the betrayed Nazis fell. Another score were stood up against the wall. Another volley. And another and another until there were hundreds of dead bodies lying there. Some of the unfortunate men, who had only been wounded by the bullets, were finished off with blows on the head.

Thus Hitler made himself secure—on the dead bodies of his own "Aryan brothers in arms."

During this blood purge of the Nazis, Hitler also sent a squad of soldiers to the home of a certain General von Schleicher, who was respected by most of the Germans, and whom Hitler

feared. The Nazis forced their way into the general's house, without warning fired a dozen shots into him and his wife, and left them lying dead on the doorstep of their home.

HITLER THRILLS GERMANY

Then Hitler sent out secret agents to all important countries, including the United States. These agents began to organize branches of the Nazi party. In America they persuaded many people of German blood to form "Bunds," where they marched and drilled in the German manner, and promised to fight for "the fatherland," meaning Germany.

In his own country, people thought that Hitler was wonderful. The children in the schools learned to sing songs in his praise. The boys and young men formed in groups called Hitler Youth, and they marched and cheered and sang for Hitler. The Nazi party held great meetings in the open air, at which men and women wept with happiness at the magic words of their leader.

Meanwhile, Hitler was rapidly building up the German army and air force. When England and France protested, he paid no attention. By 1937 he was openly helping the Spanish Fascists to win the civil war in Spain.

Nevertheless, there was some opposition to Hitler. Much of it came from the Catholic and Protestant Churches. The Nazis wanted the Churches to teach that war was good, and that Christ was a German, and that mercy and peace were "un-German ideas." They said that the Christian idea of loving one's neighbor was foolish, and that the only thing that mattered was the

power of Germany. When the priests and pastors refused to change their religion to suit Hitler, he put many of them in prison, and began to close churches right and left.

HITLER BEGINS TO CONQUER

After a few years, even Germans who admired Hitler began to find life hard under his iron hand. Wages kept going down. Taxes kept going up. The army was getting most of the money of the country. People were not eating enough meat, or eggs, or butter. More than half of the families of the country could not get along on their wages, and had to be helped by charity and government "relief."

Hitler knew that people are changeable, and that, unless he revived the spirit of the country, the Germans would lose their faith in him. Like Mussolini, he saw that the time had come to make the people cheer. And the best way to make them cheer was by conquering some other country.

Austria was the easiest target, for it had only a very weak army. In an effort to protect themselves, the Austrians asked Hitler to sign a treaty saying that he recognized their independence. He signed it—but a month later he ordered his army to invade Austria, and captured the country overnight.

The German people were excited and pleased, but the English and French were deeply alarmed. There was nothing they could do to help Austria—but would Hitler stop there? Everybody knew that he had his eye on Czechoslovakia; so the governments in London and Paris sent a note to Hitler, asking him if he would let the Czechs alone. Hitler agreed—with his tongue in his cheek.

CZECHOSLOVAKIA IS BETRAYED

In the northern part of Czechoslovakia lived many people of German blood. Hitler used this fact to claim that Germany was entitled to a province of Czechoslovakia. The Czechs prepared to defend themselves, and asked England and France to keep a promise they had made to help defend their country against Germany. But the British and French governments wanted to avoid war; and their prime ministers went to the city of Munich to talk things over with Hitler. He made a bullying speech to them, and they caved in. In spite of their pledge to the Czechs, they told Hitler that he could take the German part of Czechoslovakia if he would leave the rest of the country alone. This, they hoped, would satisfy his appetite for conquest. After this, the name "Munich" came to stand for a weak-kneed attempt to appease a warlike dictator.

The Czechs had no chance against Germany by themselves. They watched in despair while the Germans seized many of their northern towns. Then Hitler announced that he was satisfied. He told France and England, "This is the last territory that I want in Europe." But a few months later his army marched into the rest of Czechoslovakia and occupied the whole country. England and France feebly protested, while the happy Germans laughed.

ALARM IN THE WEST

At last the western democracies realized that unless they stopped Hitler, he would soon be so strong that he could defeat

them in a war and take away all their colonies. Many English and French conservatives had approved of Hitler when he broke up the German labor unions; now they began to fear him, because he was threatening their own possessions.

Hurriedly England and France began to build up their own armies and air forces. They warned Hitler that if he attempted to conquer any other countries in Europe they would fight—and this time they meant it. But he had decided that the democracies were too soft to fight, and that he could do what he wished in central Europe. Poland was his next prey. He told his people that the Poles were mistreating some Germans who lived there, and he whipped up their anger. Then he made a deal with the Russians, to be sure that their army would not help the Poles. A few weeks thereafter, he had conquered Poland, and had taken half of the country for Germany, while the other half went to Russia.

TWO MISTAKES WRECK HITLER

Denmark and Norway were next on Hitler's list of conquests. Now the British and French could no longer postpone war with Germany. The British fleet tried to blockade Germany, and the French army moved up to the German frontier. But they were outmatched. German submarines and airplanes sank a great many British ships; Hitler sent his famous armored columns crashing through Holland and Belgium; and "total war" broke out in northern France. The whole world watched with bated breath as fierce battles destroyed lives by the hundreds of thousands. France fell. England fought on.

Hitler came close to winning the war, but he was defeated by

two mistakes. One of these was his decision to invade Russia in 1941, while he was still fighting England. This was the dangerous "war on two fronts" against which Bismarck had warned Germany, and which had proved the undoing of Kaiser William II.

The second mistake was made by Germany's ally in the Far East, Japan. The Japanese, who had been gobbling up great territories in Asia, thought that they could stop the United States from interfering with them by destroying our fleet at Pearl Harbor. They succeeded in sinking many of our ships—but the result was to enrage the American people, and bring us into the war on the side of England and Russia.

The Japanese raid on Pearl Harbor—December 7, 1941—was the day of doom for Hitler, although he did not know it. A few years later his proud capital of Berlin had been smashed by American bombs. It is said that he shot himself. But his body was never found.

GERMANY IS REBUILT

As always in the stories of would-be conquerors, Hitler's people paid the penalty for his crimes. Many of their cities were flattened by bombing. Eastern Germany fell into the hands of the Russians. West Germany was occupied by American, British, and French troops.

The Germans, however, are an industrious and persistent people. With American help, West Germany rapidly rebuilt her industries, and set up a conservative republican government. A few years after the war's end, the people of West Germany were better off than most of their neighbors.

The United States wanted to make sure that the Germans had an army, and would fight on our side if we had to go to war with the Russians. But the French opposed this idea. They said that whenever Germany was strong, she attacked France—as Bismarck had done, and William II, and Hitler. In an attempt to solve the problem, the American government created an organization known as NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization). This was really a military alliance between the United States, England, France, and some smaller countries. These nations pledged themselves to help any member nation that might be attacked. And, in 1955, West Germany was allowed to join NATO, and to build up a strong military force.

WHICH WAY FOR GERMANY?

Even while our troops remained in Germany, some German politicians tried to imitate Hitler. They sneered at America and boasted that soon West Germany and East Germany would be united, and their country would be strong enough again to do as it pleased.

To be sure, there were many millions of Germans who were weary of dictatorship, and who wanted no more war. But the groups that wished Germany to become once more a great military nation increased their political power. A fear arose that in time the new, armed Germany might even make a deal with Russia, as Hitler had done. If that happened, and war came between America and Russia, might not Germany decide to remain neutral? Or even go over to the Russian side?

Such were some of the world's doubts about Germany's future, within ten years after Hitler's death.

Stalin