After Adolf Hitler was named chancellor (chief officer) of Germany in 1933, the German government stepped up efforts to expand its territory in Europe. In March 1938 the German army moved into Austria and united it with Germany. Soon, Hitler began demanding the return of land that Germany had lost after World War I (1914-18). His first target was a German-speaking section of Czechoslovakia, called the Sudetenland. Czechoslovakia didn’t have a strong enough military to stand alone against Germany and prevent it from taking the territory. Czechoslovakia’s allies, Britain and France, did not want to go to war over the territory, so they agreed to let Germany take over the Sudetenland. Hitler claimed that this would be his last territorial demand in Europe. In reality, he already had plans for conquering all of Europe.

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Adolf Hitler

Excerpt from “Hitler’s Order of the Day to the German Troops on the Eastern Front”
Issued October 2, 1941

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fter Adolf Hitler was named chancellor (chief officer) of Germany in 1933, the German government stepped up efforts to expand its territory in Europe. In March 1938 the German army moved into Austria and united it with Germany. Soon, Hitler began demanding the return of land that Germany had lost after World War I (1914-18). His first target was a German-speaking section of Czechoslovakia, called the Sudetenland. Czechoslovakia didn’t have a strong enough military to stand alone against Germany and prevent it from taking the territory. Czechoslovakia’s allies, Britain and France, did not want to go to war over the territory, so they agreed to let Germany take over the Sudetenland. Hitler claimed that this would be his last territorial demand in Europe. In reality, he already had plans for conquering all of Europe.

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“Your names, soldiers of the German armed forces, and the names of our brave allies, the names of your divisions and regiments, and your tank forces and air squadrons, will be associated for all time with the most tremendous victories in history.”
to use the port for its exports and imports. But the people of the
city were almost all German. Hitler wanted Danzig returned to
Germany and he also wanted to build a road through Polish
territory that would connect Danzig and Germany. European
leaders were no longer willing to give in to Hitler’s demands.
Poland refused to give up its right to use Danzig and England
and France swore to defend Poland if Germany attacked it.

In August 1939 Germany and the Soviet Union signed
the Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact, an agreement that the
two countries would not fight each other. On September 1,
1939, only a week after the pact went into effect, Hitler
launched a German attack on Poland. (Under the terms of the
nonaggression pact, the Soviet Union would not interfere with
Germany’s actions in Poland.) Britain and France declared war
on Germany two days later. It was too late to save Poland—by
September 24 Germany had conquered it. The stunning vic-
tory was called blitzkrieg (pronounced “BLITS-kreeg,” meaning
“lightning war” in German).
By mid-1941 Germany controlled virtually all of Europe west of the Soviet Union. In May and June it had conquered Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France. Germany’s quest for territory seemed unquenchable. Tensions were mounting between Hitler and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. The *Führer* (pronounced “FYUHR-uhr”; German term for “leader,” the title Hitler gave himself) was infuriated by Stalin’s moves to expand Soviet territory farther into central Europe. On June 22, 1941, more than three million German troops invaded the Soviet Union, thus launching the famous assault that Hitler named Operation Barbarossa. In a July 3 radio address Stalin warned his nation of the seriousness of Germany’s aggressions. “A grave danger hangs over our country,” he stated. “The enemy must be crushed. We must win.” Italy sided with Germany, declaring war on the Soviet Union and setting the stage for a long conflict with the Soviets, the British, and the Americans.

**Things to remember while reading the excerpt from Hitler’s Order of the Day:**

- In his July 3, 1941, radio broadcast Stalin predicted: “Our war for the freedom of our country will merge with the struggle of the peoples of Europe and America . . . . It will be a united front of peoples standing for freedom and against enslavement and threats of enslavement by Hitler’s . . . armies.”
- On July 12, 1941, the British and Soviet governments signed an agreement pledging mutual assistance in the war against Germany.
- Hitler’s order to the German troops on the eastern front was issued on October 2, 1941, about three and a half months after Germany invaded the Soviet Union. At this time, Hitler felt confident that Germany had won the war against the Soviet Union.
- Notice how Hitler plays upon his soldiers’ deepest emotions and rawest instincts—instincts of loyalty, courage, and survival—by telling them that Stalin had long planned a devastating invasion of Germany. He also calls on a higher power—God—to lead the German forces to victory in their war against the Soviet “beasts.”
Hitler’s Order of the Day to the German Troops on the Eastern Front

Issued October 2, 1941.

Filled with the greatest concern for the existence and future of our people, I decided on June 22 to appeal to you to anticipate in the nick of time threatening aggression by one opponent [the Soviet Union].

It was the intention of the Kremlin powers—as we know today—to destroy not only Germany but all Europe....

God’s mercy on our people and the entire European world if this barbaric enemy had been able to move his tens of thousands of tanks before we moved ours!

All Europe would have been lost, for this enemy does not consist of soldiers, but a majority of beasts....

Soldiers, when I called on you on June 22 to ward off the terrible danger menacing our homeland you faced the biggest military power of all times....

Within a few weeks his three most important industrial regions will be completely in our hands. Your names, soldiers of the German armed forces, and the names of our brave allies, the names of your divisions and regiments and your tank forces and air squadrons, will be associated for all time with the most tremendous victories in history.

You have taken more than 2,400,000 prisoners, destroyed or captured more than 17,500 tanks and more than 21,600 pieces of artillery. Fourteen thousand two hundred planes were brought down or destroyed on the ground.

The world hitherto never has experienced similar events.... Since June 22 the strongest fortifications have been penetrated, tremendous streams have been crossed, innumerable localities have been stormed and fortresses and casemate systems have been crushed or smoked out.

From far in the north, where our superbly brave Finnish allies gave evidence of their courage a second time, down to Crimea you stand today together with Slovak, Hungarian, Italian and Rumanian divisions roughly 1,000 kilometers deep in the enemy’s country.

Nick of time: At the final moment; just in time.

Kremlin: The Soviet government.

Barbaric: Primitive; backward.

Menacing: Threatening.

Allies: In this case, Hitler is referring to the countries fighting on Germany’s side.

Regiments: Military units.

Artillery: Weapons for discharging missiles.

Hitherto: Up to this point in time.

Fortresses: Strong, secure, fortified places or towns.

Casemate: An enclosed portion of a warship from which guns are fired.

1,000 kilometers: Approximately 620 miles.
Austrian-born German leader Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) rose from obscurity to become one of the most threatening figures in world history. Disinterested in the technical training courses his father had forced him to take, he left school at the age of sixteen and eventually ended up in Austria. Although Hitler fancied himself a budding young artist, he was denied admission to the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. While living in poverty in Vienna, the frustrated artist began lecturing to crowds on the virtues of German nationalism and anti-Semitism (the hatred of Jews).

Hitler fought in the German army during the First World War. In 1920 he joined the German Workers’ Party, which would soon become the National Socialist German Workers’ Party, called Nazis. Hitler became very powerful in the party. In the midst of the political and economic chaos that enveloped Germany after the war, he played on the emotions of the German people and portrayed himself as their sole savior. Hitler focused all of his attention on politics, establishing a strong foundation for the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany.

The self-proclaimed führer (pronounced “FYOOR-uh”; German term for “leader”) envisioned a world ruled by a pure, white German race. To achieve his goal of racial dominance, he ordered the murder of six million Jews, as well as all political opponents and other so-called enemies of the state. These hideous mass murders—most of them carried out in the gas chambers of concentration camps—are now collectively referred to as the Holocaust.

Hitler’s invasion of Poland in 1939 ignited World War II. Germany continued to fight under the führer’s leadership until the spring of 1945. Rather than surrender and face judgment, he reportedly committed suicide in his underground bunker (a fortified chamber) in Berlin on April 30, 1945.

Spanish, Croat and Belgian units now join you and others will follow. This fight—perhaps for the first time—is recognized by all European nations as a common action to safeguard the future of this most cultural continent.…

This outstanding achievement of one struggle was obtained with sacrifices that, however painful in individual cases, in the total amount to not yet five percent of those of the World War. . . .

Cultural: Highly developed intellectually and morally.

The World War: World War I.
During these three and a half months, my soldiers, the precondition, at least, has been created for a last mighty blow that shall crush this opponent before Winter sets in.

All preparations . . . have been made. . . . We can now strike a deadly blow.

Today begins the last great decisive battle of this year. It will hit this enemy destructively and with it the instigator of the entire war, England herself. For if we crush this opponent, we also remove the last English ally on the [European] Continent.

Thus we will free the German Reich and entire Europe from a menace greater than any since the time of the Huns and later of the Mongol tribes.

The German people, therefore, will be with you more than ever before during the few ensuing weeks. What you and allied soldiers have achieved already merits our deepest thanks.

With bated breath, the blessing of the entire German homeland accompanies you during the hard days ahead. With the Lord’s

Decisive battle: The battle that will end the war.

Instigator: An often underhanded force that urges another to take action.

Reich: (Pronounced “RIKE”) German word for “empire” or “kingdom.”

Huns: A brutal tribe from western Asia who took over central and eastern European lands around the year 400 B.C.

Mongol: Asian peoples.

Ensuing: Following.

With bated breath: An expression used to convey a feeling of anxiety or uneasiness; holding one’s breath while waiting for a decision or outcome.
aid you not only will bring victory but also the most essential condition for peace.

The Fuehrer’s Headquarters: Oct. 2, 1941.

*Adolf Hitler, Fuehrer and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces.*

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**What happened next…**

Even though German forces captured the Soviet city of Kiev in September of 1941, their December advance on Moscow failed. Stalin used the unbearably cold Russian winters to his advantage, launching his counterattack just as temperatures plunged to a bitter -40°F. The Germans retreated, but the conflict was far from over. Fierce fighting in the cities of Leningrad and Stalingrad broke out in 1942. Food was scarce. Once-thriving towns were reduced to rubble. Thousands of Soviet citizens died of starvation; others fell into the hands of the Nazis and became prisoners of war. By December, however, Soviet forces surrounded the German troops occupying Stalingrad, isolating them in the heart of the city. The German campaign in the Soviet Union ended on January 31, 1943, with the surrender of German forces. The Soviets’ triumphant defense of Stalingrad was a staggering blow to Hitler and his supposedly unbeatable army.

In December 1941, the United States officially joined the war after Japanese forces attacked an American Naval base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The United States declared war on Japan, and then Japan’s allies, Germany and Italy, declared war on the United States. Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States established a unified strategy for defeating Germany. Almost immediately the United States and Britain launched an offensive against the Germans in North Africa. Britain and the United States also planned to launch an assault in western Europe (the western front) as soon as possible, while the Soviets kept fighting in the east (the eastern front). By forcing Hitler to fight on many fronts, the Allies hoped that the Ger-
man army would be spread too thin and could be more easily defeated. The plan was to advance from the east, west, and south and squeeze the Germans between the Allied armies advancing from three directions.

Joseph Stalin

Soviet political leader Joseph Stalin (1879-1953) was born December 21, 1879, in Gori, Georgia, a southwest Asian territory that was then part of the Russian empire. He survived a difficult childhood—including an infection with smallpox, a life-threatening virus, and cruel beatings by his father—to become absolute ruler of the Soviet Union.

An enthusiastic student of Georgian history, Stalin displayed a revolutionary spirit early. His philosophies clashed with those of the theological seminary (a training ground for future priests) he attended in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi (pronounced “tuh-bih-LEE-see”) in the mid-1890s.

Stalin joined a Marxist political group in 1898. (Marxism is a political philosophy professed by nineteenth-century German philosopher Karl Marx, who believed that a revolution by the working class would lead to the formation of a classless society.) Stalin was eventually expelled from the seminary and then pursued a path of political rebellion against Russia’s czarist (pronounced “ZARR-ist”) system of government. (At the time, a single ruler called a czar exercised unlimited power over the Russian people. Stalin’s hometown, Georgia, had been independent before being taken over by czarist Russia.)

By the turn of the century Stalin had joined Russia’s Social Democratic Party (the political party opposed to the czar). When a militant, or more extreme, wing of the party developed, Stalin became an active member. Members of this more aggressive, radical wing were known as the Bolsheviks. They led the Russian Revolution of 1917, which resulted in the overthrow of the czar and the formation of the communist Soviet Union. (Communism is a system of government in which the state controls almost all the means of production and the distribution of goods. Communism clashes with the American ideal of capitalism, which is based on private ownership and a free market system.)

Following the death of Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin, Stalin eliminated all of his political opponents and managed to establish himself as the premier (chief official; first in rank) of the Soviet Union. He held this position until his own death in 1953.
Did you know...

- As a young man Hitler spent a few years in Vienna making money by painting portraits, postcard scenes, and store posters.

Stalin’s brand of Marxism was particularly harsh, leaving no room for economic freedom or for political dissent (disagreement; opposition). He transformed the Soviet Union’s economy by implementing a program of rapid industrialization and collectivizing agriculture (outlawing private ownership of farms and making them communal or state-controlled). As restrictions on freedom were tightened, feelings of discontent and conflict spread among the Soviet people. Resistors (those who opposed Stalin’s ideas and policies) were shot or imprisoned in labor camps.

When World War II broke out in Europe in 1939, Stalin aligned himself with German leader Adolf Hitler, hoping to gain more European territory for the Soviet Union. In time, however, Hitler came to view Stalin as an obstacle to the German goal of world dominance. The German leader ordered an invasion of the Soviet Union in June of 1941. After many long and bloody battles, Soviet forces finally defeated the Germans in 1943 in the Battle of Stalingrad (1942-1943).

In the years following World War II, Stalin’s efforts to expand Soviet influence throughout Eastern Europe weakened his relationship with England and the United States. The Soviet Union’s apparent quest for European—even world—domination led to intense anti-Soviet and anticommunist sentiment in the United States from the 1950s through the 1980s, a time known as the Cold War.
• While serving in the German army in World War I Hitler suffered a poison gas attack, during which he claimed to have a vision of himself as an Aryan (white) hero called upon by the gods to lead his country in a glorious 1000-year reich (reich means empire).

• In 1944, some high-ranking officers in the German military tried, unsuccessfully, to assassinate Hitler. Hitler responded to the attack by having approximately five thousand people he suspected of being involved in the plot killed.

• Hitler spent his last days in an underground bunker in Berlin. As the Russian army was overtaking Berlin, the final blow in Germany’s defeat, Hitler was in a state of extreme nervous exhaustion. It is reported that he shuffled around the bunker, stooped over, with trembling limbs, talking incoherently, and planning new war strategies for divisions of the German army that had long been defeated.

For More Information

Books


Videos


Sources


*New York Times*, May 7, 1941, p. 1; June 23, 1941, p. 1; July 3, 1941, p. 1; August 14, 1941, p. 1; October 4, 1941; October 10, 1941, p. 2.