

## The downfall of the Reich : Adolf Hitler's ignominious death proves the self-defeating, destructive nature of dictatorship, writes Richard Evans

The historian says attempts to restrain tyrants are often futile: for them it's all or nothing

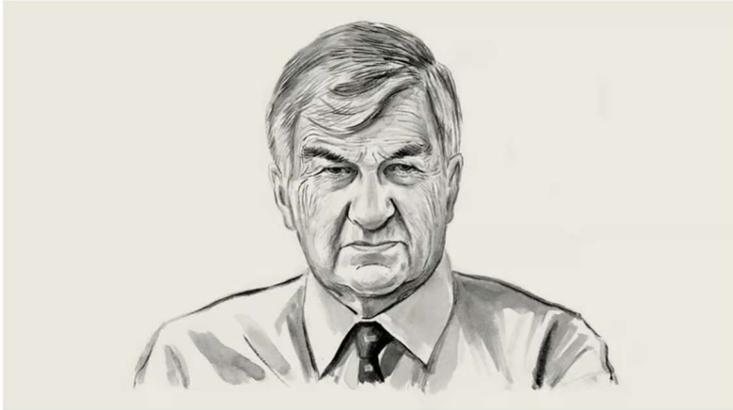


ILLUSTRATION: DAN WILLIAMS

### *Full text:*

AT AROUND 2.30 in the afternoon on April 30th 1945, Adolf Hitler sat on the sofa in his private study in the air-raid bunker below the Reich Chancellery in Berlin, put a loaded pistol to his right temple and pulled the trigger. Entering the room around ten minutes later, his personal valet, Heinz Linge, accompanied by his private secretary and head of the Party Chancellery, Martin Bormann, found Hitler slumped, blood dripping from his face onto the sofa and the floor. The corpse of the Nazi leader's long-time companion, the much younger Eva Braun, lay slumped next to him, giving off a strong smell of bitter almonds, a sure sign that she had taken a fatal dose of prussic acid.

The day before their joint suicide, the pair had married in a brief civil ceremony during which, following a requirement he himself had decreed, they had been obliged to declare formally that they were of "Aryan" descent. Following the dictator's instructions, Linge wrapped the bodies in blankets and, assisted by Hitler's personal adjutant, Otto Günsche, his chauffeur Erich Kempka and three SS men, carried them up into the Reich Chancellery garden, doused them with petrol, specially prepared for the event, and set them alight. Amid the deafening noise of the area's continuing, intense bombardment by the artillery of the Red Army, the bodies were utterly consumed, leaving only a small quantity of charred remains.

When Soviet troops arrived on May 2nd, they found two dental bridges and a lower jaw bone. Nine days later these were shown to Fritz Echtmann, a dental technician who had worked for Hitler's dentist. Echtmann consulted his records and identified the bridges as belonging respectively to Hitler and his new wife, while the jaw bone was verified as belonging to Hitler. Shortly before this, on May 8th, the remaining military leaders of the "Great German Reich" had signed a document declaring their formal and unconditional surrender to the Allies.

Hitler had left no one in any doubt about his intention to commit suicide in the event of defeat. He had indeed considered killing himself on at least two previous occasions when things had gone badly wrong, after the failed "beer-hall putsch" of November 1923, and after the suicide of his half-niece and lover, Geli Raubal, in September 1931. He was, he had said, a gambler who would always go for broke: the only alternatives he would contemplate were total victory or total defeat.

Ever since the failure of his final military offensive in the west, in the Battle of the Bulge, at the beginning of 1945, Hitler had intimated to his entourage that he did not want to stay alive to face the wrath of his enemies, not least because of the fate of his fellow-fascist dictator and one-time inspiration, Benito Mussolini, at the hands of Italian partisans: they had shot him and his companion, Clara Petacci, on April 28th and strung their bodies up from a petrol-station gantry on the outskirts of Milan to be abused, spat on and pelted with rubbish by

a hostile crowd. Hitler had rejected all attempts to persuade him to flee: “A captain goes down with his ship,” he had said.

Hitler left behind him a country in ruins. Shortly before his death, he had dictated to his secretary a “political testament”, in which he had given vent once more to the antisemitic conspiracy theory that had consumed him ever since his entry into politics at the end of the first world war. In the paranoid fantasy world his mind inhabited, the Jews were the force behind all his enemies, behind both international capitalism and communism, and behind the strategic bombing campaign that had devastated Germany’s towns and cities and caused hundreds of thousands of German deaths. They too, he said in his testament, had had to pay the price, “even if in a more humane way”, a veiled reference to the gas chambers of Auschwitz and other extermination camps that revealed his shocking indifference to the inhumanity of the actual genocide itself.

Hitler’s squalid and ignominious death pointed up the essentially self-defeating and ruinous nature of dictatorship. The Nazis had become Germany’s largest political party in 1932-33 by peddling simplistic solutions to the Weimar Republic’s many problems, from economic failure to international humiliation. In speech after speech, Hitler had promised to restore full employment by ending the Depression, to revise the Treaty of Versailles that in 1919 had taken territory and resources away from Germany, and to unify the country after years of internal bickering and indecisiveness. Only rule by a single “leader” could make Germany great again.

Such promises had a strong appeal to the conservative political, administrative, business and military elites who had resented the fall of the Kaiser and the coming of full democracy to Germany after the country’s defeat in 1918. The roots of democratic political culture were shallow and the willingness of the majority of the population to defend the Weimar Constitution was weak. Mainstream conservatives co-opted Hitler into power in 1933 in the mistaken belief they could manipulate him. They were quickly outmanoeuvred by the Nazis and the most radical and extreme dictatorship of modern times came into being, with disastrous consequences. “Bad men”, as John Stuart Mill, a 19th-century English philosopher, said, “need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing.”

Most Germans realised long before Hitler’s self-immolation that the dictatorship had brought nothing but death and destruction. There was never any revival of Nazism after 1945. Hitler rightly became one of the most widely reviled figures of modern history. His example stands as a warning against dictatorship that all would do well to heed. ■

*Sir Richard Evans is Regius Professor Emeritus of History at Cambridge University and the author of “Hitler’s People: The Faces of the Third Reich” (Penguin: 2024).*