Adolf Hitler is one of the most infamous men in history. His leadership of Germany and his role in the outbreak of World War Two are the most widely studied parts of twentieth-century history. But to fully understand his rise to power, you must understand his background.

So what was his family like? What were his ambitions as a young man? How close did he come to fulfilling these ambitions? And how did he first get involved in politics?

Adolf Hitler was born on 20 April 1889 in Braunau, a small town in Austria, near to the German border. He went to an ordinary school and enjoyed ordinary things – reading, listening to music, painting and boxing. His favourite two subjects at school were Art and History. His father was a hard-drinking bully who beat his son. He died when Hitler was 14. Hitler’s mother spoiled him and was determined he should get good grades at school and a well-paid job. However, he failed his examinations and left school at 16. His mother died when he was 17. After her death, Hitler left his hometown and travelled to Vienna, the capital city of Austria, to look for work. He had dreams of becoming a famous painter.

Hitler arrived in Vienna in 1907 and tried to pass the entrance exams for the Vienna Art Academy, one of Europe’s best art colleges. He failed twice. Short of money, he ended up living in a hostel for tramps.

For the next few years, he earned money any way he could – he painted postcards to sell in the streets, cleaned windows and swept up snow in the winter or leaves in the autumn. He soon became jealous and full of hatred. He hated people of foreign races and different religions, especially Jews. He felt they were ruining Austria by taking all the jobs and introducing their way of life. He was jealous of foreigners who were making something better of their lives than he was!

Source E, Hitler, remembering his schoolteachers in an interview in 1941. He hated all of his teachers, except his History teacher.

“My teachers did not understand young people – their one aim was to stuff our brains and turn us into educated apes – like themselves.”

Source D, Hitler’s father, Alois, worked as a postman and for Austrian customs. He was illegitimate (his parents weren’t married) and Alois took his mother’s surname of Schicklgruber. He later changed it to Hitler. Adolf was always grateful to his father for this. He said it was easy to remember!

Source B, Comments from one of Hitler’s teachers.

“He always wanted his own way. He was boastful, bad-tempered and lazy – he ignored advice and got angry if he was told off. At the same time, he demanded complete obedience from his fellow pupils.”

Source A, Hitler, circled, at school in 1899 aged ten. He was in the local church choir for five years.

Who was Adolf Hitler?
Hitler left Austria in 1913 to avoid compulsory service in the Austrian army. He went to live in Munich in Germany. When the Great War started in 1914, he decided to be a soldier after all and volunteered to join the German army.

Hitler worked all through the war, doing the dangerous job of taking messages between the trenches. He was wounded several times, once when a piece of metal sliced through his cheek nearly killing him. In total, he won six medals, including two Iron Crosses, the highest bravery award in the German army.

Letter from Hitler to a friend in July, 1908.

“Dear Friend,
To begin with, I am still in Vienna and am staying on. Still, I am enjoying my life … I have no other news to tell you except that I caught a gang of bedbugs floating dead in my own blood and that my teeth are chattering.”

A report on Hitler by his Commanding Officer during the Great War.

“Report on Lance Corporal Hitler, Third Company (Volunteers), 1916
Hitler has been with the regiment since 1914 and has fought splendidly in all the battles in which he has taken part.
As a messenger, he was always ready to carry messages in the most difficult positions at great risk to his own life.
He received the Iron Cross (2nd Class) on 2 December 1914 and I now feel he is worthy of receiving the Iron Cross (1st Class).”
In early January 1942, a group of leading Nazis gathered at a large house in the elegant Berlin neighbourhood of Wannsee. They met to discuss the quickest and cheapest way to kill all the Jews left in Europe. This amounted to an estimated 11 million people! The Wannsee Conference, as the meeting became known, resulted in one of the most shocking plans ever devised – they decided to exterminate the entire Jewish population using poison gas.

Six major extermination or death camps dotted around Nazi-occupied Europe would carry out this ‘Final Solution’ to what the Nazis called their ‘Jewish Problem’. Within a month, the first extermination camp was ready. It was just inside Poland, near the border with Germany, located near the Polish town of Oswiecim. The Germans called it Auschwitz … and it was to become the most famous death camp of all!

For many years, Germany’s Jews had been treated badly. But when war broke out in 1939, their treatment got worse – a lot worse! As Hitler’s armies invaded more and more countries, more Jews became trapped under Nazi rule. Special murder squads called Einsatzgruppen (translated as ‘One Sentence Groups’) rounded up Jews in towns all over Europe. They would take them into the countryside and order them to dig a trench. The Jews were then shot and the trench became their mass grave. In some of the bigger cities, where there was a larger Jewish population, they were bricked into a separate section of the city, called a ghetto. Food, water and power were cut off resulting in hundreds of deaths every day.

In April 1943, 750 Jews fought against German soldiers who were trying to clear the ghetto. The uprising lasted 43 days. Slowly, the German army crushed the resistance and 56,000 Jews were captured, most of whom had not had anything to do with the uprising. 7000 were shot, the rest sent to the nearest death camp – Auschwitz.

But the Nazis regarded shooting (carried out by the Einsatzgruppen) and the ghettos as an inefficient, slow method of killing. They needed a faster system, a way to kill thousands of people at once … so they created their death camps.