

# HITLER

## SIXTY-ONE YEARS ON

by

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**Sunday, April 30, 2006 - Happy Führertodestag**

Sixty one years ago today, at about three-thirty in the afternoon of Monday, April 30, 1945, Adolf Hitler and his wife of less than two days, Eva Braun, committed suicide in Hitler's private suite in the Führerbunker. A half hour later the other inhabitants of the bunker entered the suite to check if Hitler was really dead. While his doctor checked the two bodies, Hitler's valet tidied up a spill made when Eva knocked over a vase full of cut flowers in her death throes.

The group wrapped the two bodies in wool blankets and carried them up to the Chancellery courtyard for disposal. On the way out, the group was met by Hitler's chauffeur, Erich Kempka, who was returning from a scavenging expedition to find enough gas to cremate the bodies. He had been able to find something less than 200 liters, which was more than enough for the task. The group placed the bodies in a ditch, drenched them in gas, and, after a few false starts, set them on fire.

This private cremation was in accordance with Hitler's last wishes. He had left explicit instructions that his body be completely destroyed and that the only witnesses be his innermost, trusted circle of associates. They failed him on both accounts. The private ceremony, conducted under artillery fire from the Russian army only a few blocks away, was witnessed by at least two German soldiers on patrol in the Chancellery buildings that surrounded the courtyard. Although the fire burned for nearly eight hours, with no one to tend it, it failed to completely destroy the bodies. It's very difficult to rapidly destroy a body.

We can only speculate about Hitler's motives in ordering his body to be disposed of in such a manner. While he may have been concerned about denying his enemies--especially Stalin--a ghoulish trophy, his main objective was probably pure mischief. He wanted to leave his enemies in confusion, fearing his return, each suspecting the other of knowing more than they were telling. In this, he was a tremendous success.

Hitler had already been close to invisible for nine months when the siege of Berlin began. He had ceased to make public appearances or announce his movements after the July 1944 assassination attempt. Western newspapers had speculated all winter whether or not he was still alive. As the siege of Berlin began, Göbbels had announced that the Führer was still in the city leading the defense against the advancing Bolshevik hordes. Although this was true, the Western press had good reason to distrust anything that came from Göbbels. Although his announcement was printed in Western newspapers, so were rumors of assassinations, insanity, and terminal disease for the Fuehrer.

Five days before his suicide, *Pravda* began suggesting that Hitler was not in the city, but had escaped to Bavaria to make a last stand in the mountains and may have left a double to die in his place. This was an act of insurance on the part of the Soviets. If Hitler had never been in the city, they were in the clear for not capturing him and it was the fault of the western Allies for not catching him since they told us where to find him. If he escaped, it was our responsibility to close the gap as they chased him toward us. The announcement may also have reflected an element of jealousy on the part of Stalin who did not want his generals to appear too heroic and challenging to his own popularity.

As it was, Hitler was still in the city and alive until afternoon of April 30. His political will divided his powers between three of his associates. Admiral Karl Dönitz was appointed President of the Reich and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, Josef Göbbels became Chancellor, and Martin Bormann became the head of the Nazi Party. According to the German constitution, the President should have been elected and he should have named the Chancellor. The lack of better known names like Göring and Himmler, is explained by some last minute back-stabbing by Bormann, who used his presence at the bunker to eliminate rivals for influence. Göbbels was also at the bunker and managed to protect his own position. After setting fire to the bodies of the Hitlers, Göbbels telegraphed Admiral Dönitz to inform him of his new position.

Around midnight, as the cremation fires were dying, General Hans Krebs left the bunker and began crawling through the rubble of the city toward the Russian army headquarters. The trip of a few blocks took hours and it was almost sunrise when he arrived and escorted into the presence of General Vasily Chuikov. Krebs described the events of the previous day and said he was authorized by Chancellor Göbbels to negotiate a cease-fire. Chuikov had an aide get on the phone with the head of the Soviet army, Marshall Grigory Zhukov, and Zhukov had an aide get on the phone with Stalin. This means Stalin definitely had news of Hitler's death on the morning of May 1.

The Russians refused Krebs' cease-fire offer and escorted him back to the bunker around noon. After reporting, Krebs and two other army officers proceeded to get roaring drunk, sing American sea shanties, and kill themselves. After dinner, Magda Göbbels, the wife of the new Chancellor, poisoned six of her children. Then she and her husband dressed as if stepping out for the evening, climbed up to the courtyard, and killed themselves.

At 9:40 that evening, Admiral Dönitz--now President Dönitz--addressed the German people from a Hamburg radio station. In introducing the new president, the announcer said, "It is reported from the Führer's headquarters that our Führer, Adolf Hitler, fighting to the last breath against Bolshevism, fell for Germany this afternoon in his operational command post at the Reich Chancellery." There are at least three lies in that sentence. Hitler died the day before, not that afternoon. Hitler did not die in battle. There was no fighting at the Chancellery that day because the main thrust of the Soviet forces that day was the Reichstag complex a few blocks north (a battle that climaxed with a flag-raising image that is the Soviet's equivalent to our Iwo Jima photograph).

The remaining inhabitants of the bunker, including Martin Bormann, divided into two groups and made a break for freedom at around midnight. Most were killed or captured by the Russians in the attempt.

The last person in the bunker was Johannes Hentschel, a lowly mechanic who had dutifully kept the ventilation, electricity, and water running during the previous dramatic days. At one point, he had climbed up to the Chancellery greenhouse and gathered up enough garden hoses to run a water line from the bunker's private well to an army field hospital that had been set up in offices on the far side of the Chancellery building. By keeping the water running he may have saved the lives of over three hundred wounded soldiers. Now, he stayed on to watch his machinery. Towards dawn, he returned to the ruins of the greenhouse and cut several bouquets of tulips and lilacs, which he placed around the bunker to freshen the stale air. He fixed a large breakfast and did the dishes. With his duties complete, he waited for the Russians to arrive.

Mechanic Hentschel didn't have long to wait. While making his rounds at a few minutes after nine on the morning of May 2, he heard foreign voices in the upper bunker and prepared to surrender. The first Russians into the bunker were a group of women medical officers on a looting expedition. They had no interest in prisoners and left Hentschel in the hallway while they went into the inner bunker to dig through Eva Braun's closets. A few minutes later, two commissars with drawn pistols arrived. Hentschel prepared to surrender again, and could easily have been shot on the spot, except for the fact that the doctors chose that moment to rush up the stairs, giggling and waving Eva's frilly underwear over their heads. The commissars listened to Hentschel's story of the Führer's end. Another, larger, group of officers had arrived by now and had discovered the liquor supply. They handed Hentschel a mug of champagne and toasted the end of the war. Other arriving groups insisted on Hentschel repeating his story and giving tours of the bunker, but they let him take a short nap before sending him off as a POW.

Hentschel was already gone when the first team arrived in the afternoon to hunt for Hitler's body. This team recovered the Göbbels' bodies and left. A second team found a bloated body in a water tank that had correct moustache and immediately declared it to be Hitler. The next day, a private found the charred bodies of a man, woman and two dogs hastily buried in a shell crater in the garden. This fact was duly noted by the inspectors, but it was two more days before they combined that fact with the stories of Hentschel and Krebs and thought to examine them. The following week, the Soviet inspectors located a dental assistant who had worked on Hitler's teeth the previous winter. Showing her a cigar box full of jaw fragments, she correctly identified both Hitler and Braun.

By mid-May the Soviets had eyewitness accounts of Hitler's death, the physical remains of his body, and a positive identification of those remains. They should have been able to make a positive announcement that the monster was dead, thanks to the work of the Soviet army who backed him into a corner from which he could not escape. They didn't do that. The Soviet news agencies were would remain contactory and unhelpful for weeks after the fall of Berlin. Because they controlled the actual site and had captured most of the surviving witnesses, the Western news media were in no better shape after Hitler's death than before. They had only rumor and speculation to give their readers. *The Atlanta Constitution* demonstrated the dilemma of the Western press by reporting Dönitz's announcement of Hitler's death under the headline "If Hitler is Dead, Good Riddance." When honest facts emerged, there was no way to tell them apart from fantasy and they vanished into the white noise.

On May 2, even as the first investigators were searching through the Chancellery grounds, *Tass* declared the announcement from Dönitz to be a trick. That same day, Eisenhower told reporters that Himmler, while attempting to negotiate a truce through Swedish intermediaries a week earlier had claimed Hitler was terminally ill. The next day, the official Soviet announcement of the surrender of the last German troops in Berlin mentioned witnesses talking about his suicide. At the same time, German radio in the enclave under Dönitz's control continued to claim Hitler had died a hero's death in battle. In the space of a week, alert news watchers were offered three different causes of death and two dates of death, as well as well-grounded speculation that Hitler might have escaped.

The Soviets continued to be difficult. They refused to allow Westerners into Berlin even after the surrender of Dönitz's government and the last armies in the field on May 7-9. On May 10, they announced the existence of the burned bodies in the Chancellory courtyard, but only allowed that one might be Hitler. The same report went on to say that his body might never be found. On June 6, a spokesman for the Soviet army in Berlin announced unequivocally that Hitler had committed suicide and that his body had been identified. Three days later, Marshall Zhukov, the head of the Soviet army gave a press conference with Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Vishinski looking over his shoulder. "We did not identify the body of Hitler," he said. "I can say nothing definite about his fate. He could have flown away from Berlin at the very last moment."

Stalin, by now, had discovered that a live Hitler might be useful to him. The possibility of a return of Hitler justified a harsh occupation and division of Germany. The same possibility required keeping tight control on Eastern Europe; only the Soviet big brother could protect them from a resurgent Germany should Hitler return. The possibility that Hitler might be hiding in Spain was an excuse to demand the Western Allies treat the Franco regime roughly. At one point, he even insisted that Britain and the US invade Spain just to make sure Hitler wasn't there. The suggestion that the Soviet army had allowed Hitler to escape, allowed Stalin to treat the generals with contempt and hide them from the public eye.

This doesn't mean that the confusion was a carefully coordinated plot on the part of the Soviet government. Although they were in possession of all of the relevant facts about Hitler's death, there is no evidence that the people at the top put two and two together, or believed it when they did. Although they were perfectly capable of an evil conspiracy, the Soviet leadership assumed others were equally as deceptive and expected to find lies when they looked for facts. In addition, the Soviet government was one of the world's biggest bureaucracies. The poiltburo did not always know what the army was saying and the army did not always know what the propaganda branch was up to. Although all were trying to please Stalin, the boss did not always make his wishes clearly known. Chaos and uncertainty are the normal condition in a totalitarian state.

Secrecy breeds suspicion and, where there is a lack of information, the vacuum will be filled with rumor, speculation, and conspiracy theories. Hitler did all he could to encourage this in his last days. As he died, the victors in the war did a superb job of taking over the burden of creating confusion, whether they intended to or not.

Once the conspiracy theory genie has been let out of the bottle, it is almost impossible to return it. By June, the veil of secrecy that the Soviets had kept on Berlin had created a darkness too complete to be pierced by facts. They had given permission for the wildest imaginations to run free. Every story about Hitler's doubles and every sighting of the Führer, no matter how remote, was given straight-faced coverage by supposedly serious news outlets. The possibility that the Führer had escaped led numerous die-hard Nazis to brag about their part in helping him escape. Lieut. Arthur Mackensen told how he had flown Hitler from the Tiergarten park on May 5 to Denmark, where the local Nazis held a mass rally to say farewell before the Führer had departed for parts unknown. Others flew him to Spain or Japan or saw him board a U-boat for South America.

The last suggestion generated a flurry of excitement as the last U-boats at sea began surrendering during the summer. When the submarine U-530 surrendered to the Argentine authorities in early July, a Buenos Aires paper reported that the captain had delivered Hitler and Braun to a secret base in Antarctica before returning to South America to surrender. The same story was reported and embellished by the *Chicago Times* the following day.

With Hitler's delivery to Antarctica, the escape stories moved from the realm of the probable into the realm of the fantastic and spawned a whole sub-genre of conspiracy literature.

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