

Rise of Hitler – End of World War I to 1938

Hitler Becomes Leader of the Nazi Party – 1921

The National Socialist German Worker's Party (NSDAP) was officially formed in 1920, and had developed out of the old German Worker's Party. From the outset, Adolph Hitler had been an important speaker and leader within the movement, speaking to increasingly large crowds. The Nazi Party was centered in Munich which had become a hotbed of ultra right-wing German nationalists. This included Army officers determined to crush Marxism and undermine or even overthrow the young German democracy centered in Berlin. Slowly, they began looking toward the rising politician, Adolf Hitler, and the growing Nazi movement as the vehicle to hitch themselves to. Hitler was already looking at how he could carry his movement to the rest of Germany. He traveled to Berlin to visit nationalist groups during the summer of 1921. But in his absence, he faced an unexpected revolt among his own Nazi Party leadership in Munich.

The Party was still run by an executive committee whose original members now considered Hitler to be highly overbearing, even dictatorial. To weaken Hitler's position, they formed an alliance with a group of socialists from Augsburg. Hitler rushed back to Munich and countered them by announcing his resignation from the Party on July 11, 1921. They realized the loss of Hitler would effectively mean the end of the Nazi Party. Hitler seized the moment and announced he would return on the condition that he was made chairman and given dictatorial powers. The executive committee of the Nazi Party eventually backed down and Hitler's demands were put to a vote of the party members. Hitler received 543 votes for, and only one against. At the next gathering, July 29, 1921, Adolf Hitler was introduced as Führer of the Nazi Party, marking the first time that title was publicly used to address him.

The Beer Hall Putsch – November 9, 1923

In April of 1921, the victorious European Allies of World War I, notably France and Britain, presented a bill to Germany demanding payment for damages caused in the war which Germany had started. This bill (\$33 billion) for war reparations had the immediate effect of causing ruinous inflation in Germany. The German mark fell to 18,000 to the dollar. By July 1923, it sank to 160,000. By August, 1,000,000. And by November 1923, it took 4,000,000,000 marks to obtain a dollar. Germans lost their life savings. Salaries were paid in worthless money. Groceries cost billions. Hunger riots broke out. The Nazis and other similar groups now felt the time was right to strike. By now, November 1923, the Nazis, with 55,000 followers, were the biggest and best organized. With Nazi members demanding action, Hitler knew he had to act or risk losing the leadership of his Party.



And so Hitler and the Nazis hatched a plot in which they would kidnap the leaders of the Bavarian government and force them at gunpoint to accept Hitler as their leader. Then, according to their plan, with the aid of famous World War I General, Erich Ludendorff, they would win over the German Army, proclaim a nationwide revolt and bring down the

German democratic government in Berlin. On November 8, 1923, Nazi troops under the direction of Hermann Göring surrounded the place. At 8:30 p.m., Hitler and his storm troopers burst into the beer hall causing instant panic. "The National Revolution has begun!" Hitler shouted. "The Bavarian and Reich governments have been removed and a provisional national government formed. The barracks of the Reichswehr and police are occupied. The Army and the police are marching on the city under the swastika banner!" None of that was true, but those in the beer hall could not know otherwise. But then word came that attempts to take over several Army barracks had failed and that German soldiers inside those barracks were holding out against the Nazi storm troopers. Hitler decided to leave the beer hall and go to the scene to personally resolve the problem. Leaving the beer hall was a fateful error. In his absence the Nazi revolution quickly began to unravel. The three Bavarian government leaders, Kahr, Lossow, and Seisser, slipped out of the beer hall after falsely promising Ludendorff they would remain loyal to Hitler.

In the early morning hours of November 9th, State Commissioner Kahr broke his promise to Hitler and Ludendorff and issued a statement blasting Hitler. Kahr also ordered the breakup of the Nazi Party and its fighting forces. With the collapse of the Nazi revolution, it now appeared to most observers that Hitler's political career and the Nazi movement itself had come to a crashing, almost laughable end. The trial of Adolf Hitler for high treason after the Beer Hall Putsch was not the end of Hitler's political career as many had expected. Overnight, Hitler became a nationally and internationally known figure due to massive press coverage. Rather than deny the charges, Hitler admitted wanting to overthrow the government and outlined his reasons, portraying himself as a German patriot and the democratic government itself, its founders and leaders, as the real criminals. The court's verdict – guilty. Possible sentence – life. Hitler's sentence – five years, eligible for parole in six months.

Germans Elect the Nazis

Parties in the German Reichstag	May 1924	Dec 1924	Sept 1928	July 1930	Mar 1932	Nov 1932	May 1933
Communist Party (KPD)	62	45	54	77	89	100	81
Social Democratic Party (SDP).	100	131	153	143	133	121	120
Centre Party (BVP)	81	88	78	87	97	90	93
Nationalist Party (DVNP)	95	103	73	41	37	52	52
Nazi Party (NSDAP)	32	14	12	107	230	196	288
Other parties	102	112	121	122	22	35	23

Adolf Hitler and the Nazis waged a modern whirlwind campaign in 1930 unlike anything ever seen in Germany. Hitler traveled the country delivering dozens of major speeches, attending meetings, shaking hands, signing autographs, posing for pictures, and even kissing babies. Joseph Goebbels brilliantly organized thousands of meetings, torchlight parades, plastered



posters everywhere and printed millions of special edition Nazi newspapers. Germany was in the grip of the Great Depression with a population suffering from poverty, misery, and uncertainty, amid increasing political instability. For Hitler, the master speech maker, the long awaited opportunity to let loose his talents on the German people had arrived. He would find in this downtrodden people, an audience very willing

to listen. In his speeches, Hitler offered the Germans what they needed most, encouragement. He gave them heaps of vague promises while avoiding the details. He used simple catchphrases, repeated over and over. He appealed to all classes of Germans. The name of the Nazi Party itself was deliberately all inclusive – the National Socialist German Workers' Party.

On election day September 14, 1930, the Nazis received 6,371,000 votes – over eighteen percent of the total – and were thus entitled to 107 seats in the German Reichstag. It was a stunning victory for Hitler. Overnight, the Nazi Party went from the smallest to the second largest political party in Germany. It propelled Hitler to solid national and international prestige and aroused the curiosity of the world press. He was besieged with interview requests. Foreign journalists wanted to know – what did he mean – tear up the Treaty of Versailles and end war reparations? – and that Germany wasn't responsible for the First World War? Gone was the Charlie Chaplin image of Hitler as the laughable fanatic behind the Beer Hall Putsch. The beer hall revolutionary had been replaced by the skilled manipulator of the masses.

Hitler Runs for President

October of 1931 marked the beginning of the political intrigue that would destroy the young republic and ultimately make Hitler Führer of Germany. The German people were desperate for relief from the tremendous personal suffering brought on by the Great Depression, now two years old. Millions were unemployed, thousands of small businesses had failed, homelessness and starvation were real possibilities for everyone. The republic now faced another problem. In 1932, there was supposed to be a presidential election, according to law. But Hindenburg, the glue holding the floundering democracy together, was getting too old and



said he was not interested in running again. Early in 1932, Adolf Hitler received a telegram from Chancellor Bruening inviting him to come to Berlin to discuss the possibility of extending Hindenburg's present term. Hitler was delighted at the invitation. In February 1932, President Hindenburg reluctantly agreed to run again and announced his candidacy for re-election. Hitler decided to oppose him and run for the presidency himself.

In the presidential election held on March 13, 1932, Hitler got over eleven million votes (11,339,446) or 30% of the total. Hindenburg got 18,651,497 votes or 49%. Hindenburg failed to get the absolute majority he needed, making a run-off election necessary. Goebbels and many of the Nazi leaders were quite disappointed. But Hitler immediately urged them to start a vigorous campaign for the run-off to be held on April 10, less than a month away. On April 10, 1932, the people voted. They gave

Hitler 13,418,547 or 36%, an increase of two million, and Hindenburg 19,359,983 or 53%, an increase of under a million. Hindenburg, now 85, was elected by an absolute majority to another seven-year term. But no one was at ease. Hitler and the Nazis had shown massive popularity.

Hitler Named Chancellor



Germany was a nation that in its history had little experience or interest in democracy. In January 1933, Adolf Hitler took the reins of a 14-year-old German democratic republic which in the minds of many had long outlived its usefulness. By this time, the economic pressures of the Great Depression combined with the indecisive, self-serving nature of

its elected politicians had brought government in Germany to a complete standstill. The people were without jobs, without food, quite afraid and desperate for relief. Now, the man who had spent his entire political career denouncing and attempting to destroy the Republic, was its leader. Around noon on January 30th, Hitler was sworn in. Within weeks, Hitler would be absolute dictator of Germany and would set in motion a chain of events resulting in the Second World War and the eventual deaths of nearly 50 million humans through that war and through deliberate extermination. To begin, Hitler would see the German democratic republic go down in flames, literally. In February 1933, the Nazis hatched a plan to burn the Reichstag building and end democracy once and for all.

The Reichstag Burns

On his first day as chancellor, Hitler manipulated Hindenburg into dissolving the Reichstag and calling for the new elections he had wanted – to be held on March 5th, 1933. That evening, Hitler attended a dinner with the German General Staff and told them Germany would re-arm as a first step toward regaining its former position in the world. He also gave them a strong hint of things to come by telling them there would be conquest of the lands to the east and ruthless Germanization of conquered territories.

President Hindenburg had fallen under Hitler's spell and was signing just about anything put in front of him. He signed an emergency decree that put the German state of Prussia into the hands of Hitler confidant, Vice Chancellor Papen. Göring as Minister of the Interior for

Prussia took control of the police. Prussia was Germany's biggest and most important state and included the capital of Berlin. Göring immediately replaced hundreds of police officials loyal to the republic with Nazi officials loyal to Hitler. He also ordered the police not to interfere with the SA and SS under any circumstances. This meant that anybody being harassed, beaten, or even murdered by Nazis, had nobody to turn to for help. On February 22nd, Göring set up an auxiliary police force of 50,000 men, composed mostly of members of the SA and SS. The vulgar, brawling, murderous Nazi storm troopers now had the power of police.



Two days later, they raided Communist headquarters in Berlin. Göring falsely claimed he had uncovered plans for a Communist uprising in the raid. But he actually uncovered the membership list of the Communist Party and intended to arrest every one of the four thousand members. Göring and Goebbels, with Hitler's approval, then hatched a plan to cause panic by burning the Reichstag building and blaming

the Communists. The Reichstag was the building in Berlin where the elected members of the republic met to conduct the daily business of government. The exact sequence of events will never be known, but Nazi storm troopers under the direction of Göring were also involved in torching the place. They had befriended the arsonist and may have known or even encouraged him to burn the Reichstag that night. The storm troopers, led by SA leader Karl Ernst, used the underground tunnel that connected Göring's residence with the cellar in the Reichstag. They entered the building, scattered gasoline and incendiaries, then hurried back through the tunnel.

At a cabinet meeting held later in the morning, February 28th, Chancellor Hitler demanded an emergency decree to overcome the crisis. He met little resistance from his largely non-Nazi cabinet. That evening, Hitler and Papen went to Hindenburg and the befuddled old man signed the decree "for the Protection of the people and the State." On March 5th, the last free elections were held. But the people denied Hitler his majority, giving the Nazis only 44 percent of the total vote, 17,277,180. Despite massive propaganda and the brutal crackdown, the other parties held their own. The Center Party got over four million and the Social Democrats over seven million. The Communists lost votes but still got over four million. The goal of a legally established dictatorship was now within reach. But the lack of the necessary

two-thirds majority in the Reichstag was an obstacle. For Hitler and his ruthless inner circle, it was obstacle that was soon to be overcome.

Hitler Becomes Dictator



After the elections of March 5, 1933, the Nazis began a systematic takeover of the state governments throughout Germany, ending a centuries-old tradition of local political independence. Armed SA and SS thugs barged into local government offices using the state of emergency decree as a pretext to throw out legitimate office holders and replace them with Nazi Reich commissioners. The emergency decree signed

by Hindenburg on February 28th, after the Reichstag fire, made it easy for them to interfere with non-Nazi elected representatives of the people by simply arresting them. As Hitler plotted to bring democracy to an end in Germany, Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels put together a brilliant public relations display at the official opening of the newly elected Reichstag.

On March 23rd, the newly elected Reichstag met in the Kroll Opera House in Berlin to consider passing Hitler's Enabling Act. It was officially called the "Law for Removing the Distress of the People and the Reich." If passed, it would in effect vote democracy out of existence in Germany and establish the legal dictatorship of Adolf Hitler. He also promised an end to unemployment and pledged to promote peace with France, Great Britain and Soviet Russia. But in order to do all this, Hitler said, he first needed the Enabling Act. A two-thirds majority was needed, since the law would actually alter the constitution. Hitler needed 31 non-Nazi votes to pass it. He got those votes from the Catholic Center Party after making a false promise to restore some basic rights already taken away by decree. The vote was taken – 441 for, and only 84, the Social Democrats, against. The Nazis leapt to their feet clapping, stamping and shouting, then broke into the Nazi anthem, the Hörst Wessel song. Democracy was ended. They had brought down the German Democratic Republic legally. From this day onward, the Reichstag would be just a sounding board, a cheering section for Hitler's pronouncements.

Rise of Hitler Questions

1. Why do you think that the Nazi Party was so successful in the elections between 1924 and 1933? Give at least three reasons to support your answer.
2. Why was it necessary for Hitler to burn the Reichstag? Was there another way that he could have achieved his goals?
3. What was the Beer Hall Putsch, and why was it important to the rise of Hitler and the Nazis?
4. Hitler gained his dictatorial powers in Germany legally – why is this so important? And does this information change your perspective of how he came into power?
5. In your notes, give a very brief description of how Hitler went from a small-time leader of the Nazi Party to Chancellor and then Führer of Germany. This can be in bullet points, but be sure to include all of the main points listed above.

EXTENSION

6. Look at the Nazi Party election poster. What are your initial thoughts about this poster? What does it tell you about the Party?

