

The Coming of the Third Reich

Richard Evans has written two articles for History Review explaining how a modern, progressive country surrendered to a brutal and murderous dictatorship. In the first, he traces Hitler's rise to the Chancellorship.

There was nothing inevitable about the coming of the Third Reich. It used to be argued that there was something peculiar about German culture that made it hostile to democracy, inclined to follow ruthless leaders and susceptible to the appeal of militarists and demagogues; but when you look at the nineteenth century, you can see very little of such traits.

Bismarckian Background

After the collapse in 1806 of the Holy Roman Reich, Germany was disunited until the wars engineered by Bismarck between 1864 and 1871, which led to the creation of what was later called the Second Reich, the German Empire ruled by the Kaiser. In many ways this was a modern state. It had a national parliament that, unlike its British counterpart for example, was elected by universal manhood suffrage; elections attracted a voter turnout of over 80 per cent; political parties were well organised and an accepted part of the political system, and the largest of these by 1914, the Social Democratic Party, had over a million members and was committed to democracy, equality, the emancipation of women and the outlawing of racial discrimination including antisemitism. Germany's economy was the most dynamic in the world, rapidly overtaking the British by the turn of the century, and in the most modern areas, like the electrical and chemical industries, outperforming even the Americans. Middle-class values, culture and behaviour were the dominant ones by 1900.

Of course, there was a downside to the Bismarckian Reich. Aristocratic privilege remained entrenched in some areas, the national parliament's powers were limited and the big industrialists were deeply hostile to unionised labour. Bismarck's persecution, first of the Catholics in the 1870s and then of the fledgling Social Democratic Party in the 1880s, got Germans used to the idea that a government could declare whole categories of the population 'enemies of the Reich' and drastically curtail their civil liberties. In the 1890s, small extremist political parties and movements emerged, arguing that Bismarck's work of unification was incomplete because millions of ethnic Germans still lived outside the Reich.

While some politicians began to argue that Germany needed a big overseas Empire, others began to tap lower-middle-class feelings of being overtaken by big business, the small shopkeeper's fear of the department store, the male clerk's resentment of the growing presence of the female secretary, the bourgeois sense of disorientation when confronted by Expressionist and abstract art, and many other unsettling effects of Germany's headlong social and economic modernisation. Such groups found an easy target in Germany's tiny minority of Jews, a mere one per cent of the population, who had mostly been remarkably successful in German society and culture since their emancipation from legal restrictions in the course of the 19th century. Soon political parties like the Catholic Centre and the Conservatives were losing votes to these fringe parties of antisemites, and responded by incorporating into their own programmes the promise to reduce what they described as the subversive influence of the Jews in German society and culture. At the same time, Social Darwinists and eugenicists were beginning to argue that the German race needed to be strengthened by discarding the traditional Christian respect for life and by sterilising or even killing the weak, the handicapped, the criminal and the insane.

Yet these were minority strands of thought before 1914; nor did anyone weld them together into any kind of effective synthesis. If a time-traveller had gone back to the year 1910 and told a well-informed contemporary that within less than half a century a major European nation would deliberately murder six million Jews, and asked which nation the contemporary thought it would be, the answer he'd have got would probably have been France, where there had been mass antisemitic demonstrations at the time of the Dreyfus affair, or more likely Russia, where Tsar Nicholas II's Black Hundred murder gangs had killed thousands of Jews in the aftermath of the 1905 revolution; but not Germany, where overtly violent antisemitism was extremely rare.

The Turning Point

What changed all this was the First World War. In August 1914 cheering crowds, mostly of middle-class men, greeted the outbreak of war on Germany's main town squares, as they did in other countries too. The Kaiser declared that he recognised no parties any more, only Germans. The spirit of 1914 became a mythical remembrance of national unity, just as the image of Bismarck conjured up a mythical nostalgia for a strong and decisive political leader.

The stalemate reached in the war by 1916 led to the German war effort being put in the hands of two generals, Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff. But despite their tight organisation of the war effort, Germany was unable to withstand the might of the Americans when they entered the war in 1917, and by November 1918 the war was lost.

Defeat had a disastrous effect on Germany. First, the peace terms, though no harsher than those which Germany was planning to impose on other countries, were bitterly resented by almost all Germans, who had been led to believe they were actually winning the war up to the end of October 1918. Secondly, the war destroyed the international economy. Germany had paid for the war by printing money, and the result was inflation. In 1913 the dollar had been worth 4 paper marks; by the end of 1919 the rate had declined to 47; by July 1922 to 493, by December 1922 to 7,000. When in January 1923 the French and Belgians occupied the Ruhr and began to seize industrial assets and products, the German government announced a policy of non-co-operation which sparked a decline of the mark's value against the dollar that was unprecedented. If you wanted to buy a dollar in Germany in July 1923 it would cost you 353,000 marks; in August four and a half million; in October 25, 260 million; in December four million million. Economic collapse stared Germany in the face. A woman might order a cup of coffee for 5,000 marks and get a bill for 8,000 marks an hour later. By December 90 per cent of average family expenditure was going on food. A huge crime wave swept the country as people stole to survive.

Eventually the inflation was halted. A new currency was introduced; passive resistance to the Franco-Belgian occupation ended; the foreign troops withdrawn; reparations payments ensued. The inflation did not destroy the economic position of the middle classes, as used to be thought. Some, like mortgage holders, debtors, or businessmen who had bought plant on instalment payments, gained; others, such as investors or bondholders, lost; often the same people found themselves in both categories. What the inflation did was to fragment the middle classes, by pitting one interest group against another, so that no political party was able to unite them.

The post-inflation stabilisation, retrenchment and rationalisation meant massive job losses, both in industry and in the civil service. From 1924 onwards there were always millions of unemployed. Business resented the failure of government to help it in this deflationary situation and began to look for alternatives. For the middle classes in general, the inflation meant a moral and cultural disorientation that was only worsened for many by what they saw

as the excesses of modern culture in the 1920s, from jazz and cabaret in Berlin to abstract art, atonal music and experimental literature such as the concrete poetry of the Dadaists.

The Weimar Republic

A sense of disorientation was present in politics too, as defeat in war had brought about the collapse of the Reich, the flight of the Kaiser into exile, and the creation of the Weimar Republic in the revolution of November 1918. The Weimar Republic had a modern constitution, with female suffrage and proportional representation, and it has been unfairly blamed in the past for the subsequent collapse of the political system. Proportional representation did not create the deep divisions between the parties, which reflected longer-term cleavages in German society (class, religious, regional etc). Governments were short-lived, but in key ministries like labour or foreign affairs the same minister served consecutively in a whole series of successive governments and achieved substantial progress in implementing tough and consistent policies. The real problem of the constitution was the independently elected President, who had wide-ranging emergency powers under article 48 to rule by decree. This had been used extensively by the Republic's first President, the Social Democrat Friedrich Ebert. When he died in 1925, his elected successor was Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, a staunch monarchist who had no deep commitment to the constitution. In his hands, article 48 would prove fatal to the Republic's survival.

The final legacy of the First World War was a cult of violence, not just in the hands of veterans such as the radical right-wing Steel Helmets, but more particularly in the younger generation of men who had not been old enough to fight, and now tried to match the heroic deeds of their elders by fighting on the home front. The war polarised politics, with Communist revolutionaries on the left and various radical groups on the right, most notoriously the Free Corps, armed bands who were used by the government to put down Communist and far-left revolutionary uprisings in Berlin and Munich early in 1919, which they did in an orgy of bloodletting that left thousands dead. The Free Corps attempted a violent coup d'état in Berlin in the early spring of 1920, which led to an armed left-wing uprising in the Ruhr, while there were further left- and right-wing uprisings in 1923. Even in the relatively stable years from 1924 to 1929, at least 170 members of various political paramilitary squads were killed in street fighting. In the early 1930s the deaths and injuries escalated dramatically, with 300 killed in street and meeting-room clashes in the year from March 1930 to March 1931 alone. Political tolerance had given way to violent extremism. The parties of the liberal centre and moderate left suffered dramatic electoral losses in the mid-1920s, as the spectre of Communist revolution retreated and the middle classes voted for parties further to the right. Finally, the Republic's legitimacy was further undermined by the bias of the judiciary in favour of right-wing assassins and insurgents who claimed patriotism as their motive, and by the neutral stance taken by the army, which became steadily more resentful at the Republic's failure to persuade the international community to lift the restrictions placed on its numbers and equipment by the Treaty of Versailles.

Nazi Failure

There was a huge variety of extremist, antisemitic groups on the far right in 1919, but by 1923 one of them stood out above the rest: the National Socialist German Workers' Party, led by Adolf Hitler. So much has been written about the power and impact of Hitler and the Nazis that it is important to point out that his party was on the far margins of politics until the very end of the 1920s. Hitler, in other words, was not a political genius who raised mass support for himself and his party single-handedly.

Hitler's party, founded in 1920, was more dynamic, more ruthless and more violent than other extreme-right-wing

fringe groups. In 1923 it felt confident enough to try a violent coup d'état in Munich as a prelude to a march on Berlin along the lines of Mussolini's successful, though actually only threatened, march on Rome the previous year. But he failed to win over the army or the forces of political conservatism in Bavaria, and the coup was dissipated in a hail of gunfire. Hitler was convicted and put into Landsberg gaol, where he dictated his autobiographical political tract, *My Struggle*, to his dogsbody Rudolf Hess: not a blueprint for the future, to be sure, but a compendium of Hitler's ideas, above all antisemitism and the idea of a racial conquest of eastern Europe.

By the time he came out of prison, Hitler had assembled the ideology of Nazism from disparate elements of antisemitism, pan-Germanism, eugenics and so-called racial hygiene, geopolitical expansionism, hostility to democracy, and cultural anti-modernism, which had been floating around for some time but had not so far been integrated into a coherent whole. He gathered around him a team of immediate subordinates - the talented propagandist Joseph Goebbels, the decisive man of action Hermann Göring, and others - who built up his image as leader and reinforced his sense of destiny. But despite all this, and despite the violent activism of his brownshirt paramilitaries on the streets, he got nowhere politically. In May 1928 the Nazis only got 2.6 per cent of the vote, and a 'Grand Coalition' of liberal and leftist parties led by the Social Democrats took office in Berlin.

The Great Depression and German Politics

In October 1929 the Wall Street crash brought the German economy tumbling down with it. American banks withdrew the loans on which German economic recovery had been financed since 1924. German banks had to call in their loans to German businesses in response, and businesses had no option but to lay off workers or go bankrupt, which indeed many of them did. Within little more than two years one German worker in three was unemployed, and millions more were on short-term work or reduced wages. The unemployment insurance system broke down completely, leaving increasing numbers destitute. Agriculture, already under strain because of a fall in world demand, collapsed as well.

The political effects of the Depression were calamitous. The Grand Coalition broke up in disarray. So deep were the divisions between the parties over how to deal with the crisis - through further cutbacks, urged by the right, or through more spending on welfare, urged by the left - that a parliamentary majority could no longer be found for anything. Hindenburg appointed a cabinet of experts under the Catholic politician Heinrich Brüning, an avowed monarchist, which proceeded to impose savagely deflationary cutbacks, only making the situation worse still. And it did so by using the Presidential power of rule by decree under Article 48 of the constitution, bypassing the Reichstag altogether. From 1920 to 1930 it sat on average for 100 days a year; from October 1930 to March 1931 it was in session for 50 days; from then to July 1932 it met for only 24 days; and from July 1932 to February 1933 it convened for a mere three days in six months. Political power was diverted from parliament upwards, to the circle around Hindenburg, and downwards, onto the streets, where violence now escalated exponentially.

For the thousands of young men who joined the brownshirts, violence quickly became a way of life, almost a drug, as they launched against the Communists and the Social Democrats the unbridled violence their elders had launched against the enemy in 1914-18. A collection of nearly 600 brownshirt autobiographies compiled in 1934 reveals a visceral hatred of the Communists, the 'red murder mob', as one stormtrooper called them. The brownshirts were fired by a doctrine of self-sacrifice, by the vision of a Germany without parties or classes, and not least by the oratory of the Nazi leader. Unless we can understand the depths of their fanaticism, it is impossible to understand the extremes of their violence.

It was not unemployment that drove young men into the ranks of the brownshirts; the unemployed in fact flocked to the Communists, whose vote rose steadily until it reached 17 per cent, with 100 seats in the Reichstag, in November 1932, and into the ranks of the Red Front-Fighters' League, which clashed regularly with the stormtroopers in the poorer quarters of Germany's big cities. The Communists' violent revolutionary rhetoric, promising the destruction of capitalism and the creation of a Soviet Germany, terrified the country's middle-classes, who knew only too well what had happened to their counterparts in Russia after 1918. Appalled at the failure of the government to solve the crisis, and frightened into desperation by the rise of the Communists, they began to leave the squabbling little factions of the conventional political right and gravitate towards the Nazis instead. While middle-class parties collapsed completely, the Social Democrats and the Catholic Centre managed to restrict their losses. But by 1932 they were all that was left of the moderate centre, squashed helplessly between 100 uniformed Communist and 196 brown-shirted deputies in the Reichstag. The polarisation of politics could hardly be more dramatic.

The Nazis, then, as the elections of September 1930 and July 1932 showed, were a catch-all party of social protest with particularly strong middle-class support and relatively weak, though still very significant, working-class backing at the polls. They had broken out of their core constituency of the Protestant lower middle classes and farming community, projecting an image of dynamism. The hated, calamitous Weimar Republic had to be got rid of, the Nazis argued, and the people united once more; Germany had to reassert itself on the international scene and become a leading international power again. Specific policies were modified according to their audience. Hence antisemitism was played down where it met with no response, which is to say in most parts of the electorate. The middle-class ex-schoolteacher Louise Solmitz, for example, wrote in her diary: 'I'm delighted at Hitler's lack of a programme, for a programme is either lies, weakness, or designed to catch the stupid. The strong man acts from the necessity of a serious situation and can't allow himself to be bound by a programme.'

Political Crisis

Besides the Nazis and the Communists battling it out on the streets, and the intriguers around President Hindenburg vying for the old man's ear, a third major player now entered the political game: the army. Increasingly alarmed by the rise of Communism and the growing mayhem on the streets, the army also saw the new political situation as an opportunity to get rid of Weimar democracy and impose an authoritarian, military dictatorship that would repudiate the Treaty of Versailles and rearm the country in preparation for a war of reconquest of Germany's lost territories, and perhaps more besides. The army's power lay in the fact that it was well armed, at least in domestic terms, and was the only force that could effectively restore order in the shattered country.

Chancellor Brüning had failed in almost everything he had undertaken, from solving the economic crisis to restoring order to Germany's towns and cities, and in 1932 he offended Hindenburg by failing to secure his re-election as President unopposed and also by proposing the break-up of the kind of landed estate Hindenburg himself owned in Eastern Germany to help the destitute peasantry. The army was anxious to get rid of him because his deflationary policies were preventing rearmament and hoped to enlist the Nazis, now the largest political party, to destroy Weimar democracy. In May 1932 Brüning was forced to resign and was replaced by the Catholic landed aristocrat Franz von Papen, a personal friend of Hindenburg's.

Papen's advent to power sounded the death-knell of Weimar democracy. Papen used the army to depose the Social Democratic state government in Prussia and prepared to reform the Weimar constitution by restricting voting rights and drastically curtailing the legislative powers of the Reichstag. He began to ban inconvenient or critical issues of daily newspapers and to restrict civil freedoms. But the elections he called in July 1932 failed to

resolve the situation, only registering a further increase in the Nazi vote, which now reached 37.4 per cent of the poll. Papen's attempt to enlist Hitler and the Nazis in support of his government failed on Hitler's insistence that he not Papen, had to head the government. Lacking almost any support in the country, Papen was forced to resign when the army lost patience with him.

The new head of government, General Kurt von Schleicher, proved perhaps somewhat more imaginative. He at least began to take advantage of Germany's departure from the Gold Standard and the end of reparations to begin a modest programme of job creation and economic reflation. But he did no better at restoring order or co-opting the Nazis to give the semblance of popular backing to his policy of creating an authoritarian state. Hindenburg and his entourage, who cordially detested Schleicher, now recognised that co-opting Hitler and the Nazis was the only way to get rid of him. After the Nazis had lost two million votes in the Reichstag elections of November 1932, their evident decline and their obvious lack of funds created a serious division in the Party's ranks, and led to the Party organiser and effective second man after Hitler, Gregor Strasser, resigning from the Party in frustration at Hitler's refusal to negotiate with Hindenburg and Papen.

The moment seemed right to take advantage of the Party's weakness. On 30 January 1933, with the agreement of the army, Hindenburg appointed Hitler as head of a new government in which all the other posts bar two were held by conservatives, with Papen as deputy Chancellor at their head. 'Within two months', Papen confidently told a worried conservative acquaintance, 'we will have pushed Hitler so far into a corner that he'll squeak.' It was to prove a fatal miscalculation.

Issues to Debate

- What role did the Great War play in the rise of the Nazis?
- Was the Weimar Constitution fatally flawed?
- To what extent did Hitler come Chancellor by democratic means?

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