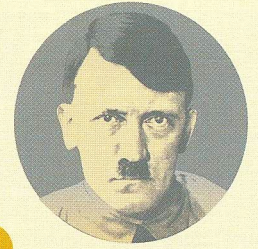


Hitler's rise to power, 1930–33



The State President, the commander of the army, and the powerful state of Prussia were all determined to stop him. He had no coherent policies, and his party's ideas were vague and often contradictory. So how was Hitler able to come to power in 1933? Was it really his own doing, or did he just take advantage of the intrigues and posturing of the other parties?

Roderick Gordon



Hitler and fellow Brown Shirts at Nuremberg in the early 1930s.

Hitler's rise to power during the **Depression** years of 1930–33 is one of the most complex episodes in modern political history. This chiefly arises from the chaotic nature of German politics in this period. Genuine power was not consistently invested in, or exercised by, the government and Reichstag (German parliament), but by a small group of men surrounding President Hindenburg. Power also lay in possible threats of force by the German army and political violence by the Nazi **SA**.

'Wheeling and dealing'

In this period there were numerous elections. More important than these were the negotiations which

took place between the ruling **clique** around President Hindenburg and the leader of the Nazi Party, Adolf Hitler. These culminated in his appointment — not his election — as chancellor of Germany on 30 January 1933, in coalition with Conservatives such as Hugenberg and Franz von Papen.

The Reichstag in the period 1930–33 degenerated into a **bear garden** in which no parties could create coalitions large enough to constitute an overall majority. Power was exercised largely by President Hindenburg under Article 48 of the constitution, which gave him the power to rule by decree in the event of emergency. It was also exercised intermittently, for example by Chancellor von Papen, who in 1932 authorised the temporary banning of the SA. Increasingly overshadowing this disintegrating system was the NSDAP (the National Socialist Workers Party — Nazi Party) a violent, dynamic, antidemocratic movement which was attempting to gain power through a mixture of electioneering and negotiation with the Hindenburg clique.

NSDAP as a political force

The onset of the Depression in Germany had seen a dramatic improvement in the electoral prospects of the Nazi Party; in the 1930 election their representation in the Reichstag increased from 12 seats to 107. The Nazis were able to exploit this extraordinary success through a combination of dynamic leadership, Hitler's gifts as an orator and their skill at propaganda (especially the tremendous impression created by the open-air rallies such as the 1930 Nazi Party Congress, which was attended by nearly 200,000 people). They had also paid careful attention to their clearly identifiable areas of electoral support. The Nazis were strong in the rural areas of Protestant north Germany, such as Schleswig-Holstein, and in the east, around Posen, Pomerania and East Prussia. They were also strong in small towns all across Germany, but failed to make an

Depression: economic downturn bringing unemployment and poverty for many.

SA: *Sturmabteilung*, the Brown Shirts, early Nazis led by Ernst Röhm. The SA lost much of its influence after the 1934 Night of the Long Knives.

clique: a small, often self-interested group or set.

bear garden: unseemly, untidy fighting.

? What were the problems facing the Weimar government, and why was it unable to cope with them?

Auslanddeutsche: Germans living outside the Reich.

oligarchy: government by a small group of elites.

SPD: the Social Democratic Party, i.e. the socialists.

KPD: the German Communist Party.

Messiah: a Jewish religious term for a saviour, now in general use.

Comintern: Communist International — the organisation in charge of spreading communist revolution worldwide.

Leipzig trial: a trial of pro-Nazi army officers.

Länder: The administrative regions of Germany, based on the old independent states. Each *Land* had its own internal government, which, among other things, controlled the police.

impact in the more urbanised areas of the south and west and the big cities. They were popular with the lower-middle classes, the elderly and students, but their most devoted followers were farmers and farmworkers.

The Nazi Party itself was a mass of contradictions: its leadership was almost entirely south German, Austrian and *Auslanddeutsche*, yet its electoral support was mainly in the north and east. Many of its members professed left-wing sympathies, particularly in the SA, though this often went hand in hand with crude anti-Semitism. Yet its leadership sought to cultivate relations with the established right as represented in the army, big business, and the **oligarchy** of Conservative politicians around Hindenburg — the real centre of power in Germany. These contradictions were somehow resolved in the person of the Nazi leader, Adolf Hitler.

Hitler's route to power

Hitler used all the developments of modern technology at that time to assist his political rise. For example, he used motor and air transport, radio, cinema, mass advertising and, above all, mass rallies, to create a gigantic impression of militant, unstoppable dynamism. This impression was backed up by the force and muscle of the SA, which under Ernst Röhm became a huge paramilitary force, much larger than the German army. The SA was used to intimidate opponents such as the **SPD** and the **KPD**. Finally, the propaganda gifts of Joseph Goebbels created the myth of the Führer — the 'Man of Destiny' — who had emerged like a **Messiah** out of obscurity to lead Germany back to greatness.

Barriers to power

What were the genuine barriers which stood in the way of the Nazi accession to power? The most significant was the opposition of the hugely respected president of the republic, Paul von Hindenburg. He was clearly anti-Nazi and refused to give in to Hitler's uncompromising demands for complete power and installation as German chancellor, complete with a Nazi cabinet. Also important was the attitude of several Conservative

politicians: Franz von Papen, General von Schleicher and Oskar von Hindenburg, the son of President Hindenburg. They resisted Hitler's demands, made during the repeated negotiations that took place during this period. To some extent, Hitler himself imposed a barrier to his own success by holding out for an offer of complete power, though in the end even he was forced to compromise.

General Groener, the head of the army until 1932, was a highly intelligent and courageous opponent who could well have had the strength to act against the Nazis. However, once he had been forced to resign, the remaining army leadership was politically timid and unlikely to assert itself. Less well-known was the SPD government in Prussia, which commanded a police force of 180,000, armed and motorised, which could have been used to crush the SA. Its leader, Griezinski, was an anti-Nazi of great courage, though the government itself was eventually 'betrayed' by von Papen and dissolved. In the end, those anti-Nazi forces which might have been effective were undermined by the arch-conspirators von Papen and General von Schleicher.

The SPD had collapsed as a national political force from 1930, although it was capable of sporadic resistance in the Reichstag. The KPD, controlled by the **Comintern** in Moscow, held the ideological position that the chief enemy was the SPD (as 'social fascists') and that the Nazis represented the final disintegrating stage of capitalism, which would be followed by a communist revolution.

In the end, one of Hitler's greatest advantages was the inability of the German political system to invest genuine power in its elected government and legislature. From 1930, real governmental power rested with a small oligarchy of Conservative politicians. They wished to restore the status quo of 1914 and were deluded that the Nazis would help them to achieve this. They also helped the Nazis greatly by undermining the enemies of Nazism, such as General Groener and the SPD government in Prussia.

The influence of the German military

Also working to the advantage of the Nazis was the increasingly favourable attitude of the army, which from 1929 progressively lost faith in the ability of a parliamentary system to provide the stable framework under which a programme of rearmament could take place. At the **Leipzig trial** in 1931 Hitler made clear his intention of producing such a programme.

After their outstanding success in the September 1930 elections, the Nazis became even more popular, with 100,000 people joining the party between September and December 1930. However, at the same time, they encountered problems with the SPD government in Prussia, which banned the wearing of the SA uniform, outdoor rallies and

Heinrich Brüning (1885–1970)

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|-------------------|--|
| 1924 | Became a Centre Party deputy for Silesia. |
| March 1930 | Appointed chancellor by Hindenburg, but had no parliamentary majority, so was dependent upon Hindenburg's patronage. |
| 1931 | Proposed Austro-German customs union to counter the Depression. |
| May 1932 | Having lost Hindenburg's confidence, he was replaced by von Papen. |
| 1934 | Escaped to Holland from Germany and settled in USA. |

Key points

- ✦ Hitler was appointed chancellor: he did not achieve this by electoral victory.
- ✦ There were so many political parties in Weimar Germany that none could achieve absolute electoral victory. This created a power vacuum and political instability.
- ✦ Lack of an overall majority obliged politicians to negotiate and intrigue in pursuit of power.
- ✦ Hitler and the NSDAP were well organised to exploit both the power vacuum and the economic depression that underpinned it.
- ✦ The German military, alarmed by the power vacuum and political instability, supported Nazism because they thought it would create stability.
- ✦ Hindenburg and the Conservative clique thought that they would be able to control Hitler once he became chancellor.

parades, and made it illegal for Nazis to join the civil service. The SPD president, Otto Braun, also proposed a merger between the Prussian government and the national government. While welcoming this development, Chancellor Heinrich Brüning did nothing to bring it about.

At the same time in early 1931, Hitler's prospects seemed to be improving, as he was invited for an interview, first with Brüning and then with Hindenburg. Unfortunately for Hitler, he made a very bad impression on Hindenburg, who rejected the notion of political cooperation.

Elections and negotiations

From October 1931 to January 1933, when he was finally offered power, Hitler was involved in a continual round of elections and negotiations. The Nazis followed the dual tactic of attempted compromise with the ruling clique and straightforward attempts to achieve power by winning a majority in the Reichstag.

In March 1932, Hitler entered the presidential election (as opposed to the election for chancellor) against President Hindenburg, the chief and most immovable obstacle to his accession to power. Hitler won 30% of the vote, as opposed to 49% for Hindenburg. A second presidential election was held in April 1932, in which Hindenburg won nearly 53% of the vote. This was followed by elections in the German *Länder*. However, the Nazis received a serious blow when the *Länder* governments in Prussia and Bavaria banned the SA, in which they were supported by the minister of defence, General Groener.

However, shortly after this, General von Schleicher (the arch-conspirator in the Conserva-



Elections

Reichstag

1930
July 1932
November 1932

Presidential

March 1932
April 1932

tive clique and known as the '**field-grey eminence**') engineered the dismissal of General Groener. This was because he had decided that Nazi support was necessary for a strong government, and he wished to win this support by removing the most prominent anti-Nazi in the government. Groener resigned on 12 May 1932, the victim of von Schleicher's treachery, though von Schleicher had once been a close colleague. Then Hindenburg forced Brüning to resign because of his proposal to nationalise **Junker** estates in East Prussia.

Brüning's replacement was Franz von Papen, a man who owed his position as chancellor to his influence over Hindenburg. He had no political support, not even from his own **Centre Party**. He was, fundamentally, von Schleicher's political puppet. Von Schleicher had by then become minister of defence.

Von Papen's appointment led to another Reichstag election in July in which the Nazis won 230 seats. There was terrible political violence between the Nazis and the KPD, in which 1,200 people were killed or injured. On 29 July von Papen dissolved the SPD government in Prussia, one of the chief Nazi opponents. However, as a result of the election, Hitler still lacked a majority. In August 1932 Hitler was offered the vice-chancellorship, but rejected it. Then, in September 1932, von Papen lost a **vote of confidence** in the Reichstag, and in November 1932 another election was held in which support for the Nazis was reduced to 196 seats. Hindenburg then told Hitler that he would only be offered the leadership if he

President Hindenburg with Chancellor Hitler, May 1933.

field-grey eminence: an in-joke. Field grey is the colour of the German army uniform; '*éminence grise*' means someone who exerts power behind the scenes.

Junker: the landed aristocracy of Germany, who had ruled in the Kaiser's day. Hindenburg was a good example of a Prussian Junker.

Centre Party: also called the *Zentrum*. A party originally set up to defend the interests of the Catholic church. By the 1930s it had become just another right-wing party.

vote of confidence: a vote on whether or not the government is competent to run the country. Losing a vote of confidence is very serious, and usually means resignation.



NÜRNBERG

? What were the elements that could have prevented Hitler from achieving power?

Conservative Nationalists:

the more traditional Conservative party in German politics. It shared some common ground with the Nazis, but was not as extreme, and did not seek to destroy the constitution.

could achieve a majority in the Reichstag. In December von Schleicher, at long last, became chancellor. But his was to be the shortest occupancy of the office.

By January 1933 Hitler had made a crucial change of tactics and declared his willingness to cooperate with von Papen and the **Conservative Nationalists**. By 23 January von Schleicher had failed to get a majority in the Reichstag. Although the chancellor had to be able to command a majority, he did not have to be the leader of the largest party. The president was free to appoint anyone he thought might control the Reichstag. Eventually, after prolonged negotiation, aware that everything else had been tried and that Hitler was now prepared to compromise, Hindenburg offered Hitler the post of chancellor. Ostensibly this was in coalition with the Nationalists, but only two Nazis were allowed in the cabinet: Goering and Frick. On 30 January 1933, Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany.

Franz von Papen (1879–1969)

- 1921** Entered politics as leader of the Centre Party in Prussian legislature.
- June 1932** Hindenburg's preferred choice for chancellor, but had no parliamentary majority.
- July 1932** Collaborated with Hitler hoping to dilute Hitler's radicalism.
- September 1932** Lost chancellorship over policy disagreement with Hindenburg.
- January 1933–34** Served as vice-chancellor to Hitler.
- 1934–38** In Austria he assisted Anschluss (union of Germany and Austria).
- 1946** Tried at Nuremberg for 'conspiring to wage aggressive war' and acquitted.

Conclusion

Hitler rose to power because of the failure of the Weimar Republic to find an answer to the economic depression or to evolve an effective system of government. From 1930 power was in the hands of a clique of Conservative Nationalists, who could admit or expel members of the government at will. So Hitler's accession was a matter of a single decision on their part, though it was underpinned by Nazi electoral success, its powers of organisation and its application to the task of achieving power. Despite its clear dynamic elements, the Nazi movement, and more particularly Hitler himself, was consistently underestimated by the Conservatives. In other words, the Hindenburg clique thought they could install him in power and control him. This, more than anything, gave the Nazis their peaceful accession to power.

Roderick Gordon is a tutor, author and examiner and a member of the Institute of Historical Research.

Further study

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