



NSDAP rally in Munich following the Beer Hall Putsch, 1923.

The rise of the Nazi Party

Germany was awash with right-wing parties after the First World War. What made the Nazis stand out from the crowd?

Key concept

Causation

Before you read this

You have probably studied the early years of the Nazi Party in some detail. Make a list of those aspects of its policy or practice that would most appeal to non-Nazis. Would you include Hitler?

In 1919, in the chaotic aftermath of the First World War, the German Workers Party — soon to be renamed the National Socialist German Workers Party — was formed in Munich. Within 13 years, this fringe band of resentful, beer-swilling, radical nationalists grew into a charismatic mass movement. In the renewed crisis of the economic depression, it was able to seize power and establish a dictatorship whose

brutality was unprecedented in western European history.

At first sight, the emergence of the Nazi Party presents an apparently unresolvable conundrum — how could such a group of marginal, radical outsiders to the mainstream of German politics capture power in a modern, civilised nation? One key to understanding this lies in gaining a clear picture of the nature of the Nazi Party in its early years and the circumstances under which it was formed.

Background

In two respects, the image of the Nazis as a group which entered the stage of German politics from the outside, so to speak, is misleading.

First, there was little, if anything, about Nazi ideology that was new. The blend of militarist, nationalist, colonialist and racist thinking making up the Nazi world view reflected ideas which had been quite commonplace in sections of German society for a time. Since the 1880s and 1890s, a number of radical nationalist pressure groups had promoted views that were often quite similar to those which Hitler would adopt.

Neil Gregor

Inflationary bank notes used as waste paper in the 1930s.

overseas colonies: towards the end of the nineteenth century, Germany joined in the Europeans' scramble for colonies, taking lands in west, east and southwest Africa, China and the Pacific.



Thus the Colonial League, formed in 1882, agitated for the acquisition of **overseas colonies** by Germany, while the Navy League (formed in 1898) argued for the expansion of the German Navy as a precondition for the establishment of a German empire. Their vision was not identical to Hitler's — he was to prefer a strategy of continental expansion in the east — but they did contribute to the growth of a nationalist climate in Germany which helped to pave the way for the Nazis.

Other such pressure groups, moreover, did promote the idea of German domination of Europe. The most important of these was the Pan-German League, formed in 1891. Some of the members of this organisation turned up after the First World War as early supporters of the Nazi Party. This is significant precisely because it enables us to trace direct links between the Nazi Party and its nationalist predecessors. During the First World War, support for radical nationalist politics grew in Germany, especially among the middle class. Many joined the newly founded Fatherland Party in 1917 — a mass party with a nationalist ideology which helped to pave the way for mass right-wing politics in the post-1918 years.

Second, it is equally important to point out that the Nazi Party was far from unique in the early postwar period. Its initial power base was in Munich. From here it spread across southern Germany, and soon began to found branches in other cities further afield. But outside Munich it had a number of similar competitors against whom it had to struggle to assert itself. In neighbouring Nuremberg, for example, it faced the challenge of the German Socialist Party (the DSP), which

was led by the vicious anti-Semite Julius Streicher. The DSP eventually merged with the Nazi Party in 1922.

As another example, one might point to the German Racist Freedom Party, which remained a rival to Hitler for considerably longer than that.

Both these factors — the existence of radical nationalist pressure groups before the First World War and the simultaneous emergence of other extreme right wing parties after the war — tell us that the ground was, perhaps, considerably more fertile than the customary image of the Nazis as a

Key points

- The Nazi Party grew out of a pre-existing nationalist climate and was only one of a number of far right-wing parties in the immediate postwar years.
- It appealed to many ordinary Germans looking for a way out of the chaotic conditions of the postwar period, especially those caused by defeat and inflation.
- The Beer Hall Putsch reflected Hitler's belief that politics should be about action, not talking or voting, and reflected the violent style of the Nazis.
- Although the putsch was a failure, Hitler learned important lessons and gained a number of long-term advantages from it.

Questions

- Does the proliferation of extreme right-wing groups in Germany explain better the Nazis' failure before 1924 or their success after it?
- Given the level of support for right-wing groups in Germany, why did the Germans not dismantle the Weimar Republic earlier?
- Why did the Germans think that a readiness to use violence indicated an ability to solve Germany's economic problems?

band of fringe outsiders would suggest. The climate was already receptive: all that was needed was someone with sufficient charisma and dynamism to take advantage.

The postwar context and Hitler's appeal

What we have to explain is how the Nazis were able to assert their dominance gradually over the other parties of the extreme right — in other words, to unite the forces of the radical right around Hitler — and why Hitler's party emerged as the most radical alternative to the struggling Weimar democracy.

Part of the answer to this lies in understanding the depth of the crisis facing German society after the First World War. The war itself, and especially the Allied blockade, brought immense hardship and intensified the divisions in German society. The revolution of 1918–19 was followed by a strong right-wing backlash. Many demobilised soldiers found it hard to adapt to civilian life and joined paramilitary squads, which inflicted much violence on their left-wing opponents. Above all, **inflation** brought misery to sections of the middle class and created a general sense of disorder and chaos. Many Germans blamed the Jews for this disorder, along with the Treaty of Versailles. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that many Germans believed in the need for highly radical solutions to Germany's problems and gave their support to the most radical alternative available.

The Nazi Party spread rapidly. In an era in which public meetings and rallies were the main means of attracting support, it soon became clear that Hitler's unique speaking skills were a key weapon. Portraying himself as an ordinary German who had fought as an ordinary soldier in the First World War, Hitler was able to put forward successfully an image of himself as a man of the people — as someone who understood ordinary Germans' desires. He had an instinctive feel for his audience, and was adept at putting into words the feelings that they already had. In other words, his speeches chimed with the audience, not because he was able

to persuade them with his oratory, but because they reflected what the audience already believed. By telling them what they already knew, he was able to create a strong sense of bonding with his listeners.

However, the Nazis' appeal cannot all be put down to Hitler as an individual. Ordinary Germans were also attracted to the style of the party and its activism. With their marching, their uniforms and their parades, with their banners, their music and their fighting spirit, they gave the impression of being the only party willing to take the necessary action to restore order and make Germany great again. The different style of politics pursued by the Nazis marked them out as unlike the other right-wing parties, and gave them the sense of being a dynamic alternative, rather than just another ineffective talking shop.



Ludendorff and Hitler on trial for treason, 1924.

The Beer Hall Putsch

The marching, uniforms and banners of the party were there, in part, for propaganda purposes: to create the image of dynamic action. But they also reflected something deep-seated in the character of the Nazi movement: its militaristic style and its belief in violence as a tool of politics. Nazism was born of the First World War, of the experience of military violence and the myth of a classless community forged in the blood of the trenches. It glorified violence on every level. It believed not in the politics of talking, but in the politics of action.

inflation: the German postwar economy was unstable, exacerbated by payment of reparations to the First World War victors. The German government coped by printing more and more money, reducing its value and resulting in a currency crisis in 1923. By November, the dollar was equal to 4.2 billion marks, whereas in 1914 the dollar had been equal to 4 marks.

Type 'Hitler' or 'Nazi' into a search engine and your computer will probably explode, there are so many sites devoted to the subject — some of them extremely unsavoury. You should be particularly careful to check that any site you are looking at has not come from a neo-Nazi group. Quite safe is the programme of the early Nazi Party available at:

www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/25points.html.

There is a good account of the Beer Hall Putsch, including film of Hitler and his pals carrying out a ritual re-enactment of it, at:

http://stevenlehrer.com/beerhall_putsch.htm, while Hitler's trial is described at www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/riseofhitler/trial.htm.

For some of the other nationalist groups kicking around in these early years, you can find the programme of the Pan-German League at:

www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1890pangerman.html.

There is a useful overview of the Fatherland Party at:

www.firstworldwar.com/atoz/fatherlandparty.htm and if you want a more detailed account, see the book review at: www.jstor.org/view/00222801/di000018/00p00474/0.

Finally, if you are not sure what Hitler was up to in his 'wilderness years', before the failed putsch and his sudden rise to power in 1931–33, have a look at: <http://mars.wnec.edu/~gempel/courses/hitler/lectures/wilderness.html>.

March on Rome: a ploy threatened by Mussolini and the Fascists whereby, during October 1922, the Fascist Party came to power in Italy.

French occupation of the Ruhr: in January 1923 the French and Belgians occupied the Ruhr with a view to securing its coal production in lieu of unpaid reparations, due under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.

SA: *Sturmabteilung* (storm troopers). Nazi paramilitary force, known from their uniform as Brown Shirts. Its leader, Ernst Roehm, had ambitions for it to replace the army.

depression: the 1929 Wall Street Crash and Slump undermined world trade and currency stability. Withdrawal of foreign loans to Germany produced economic crisis, widespread unemployment and lack of confidence in democracy, all of which destabilised the Weimar government.

It was, therefore, only logical that its first attempt on power was through a coup. Inspired, in part, by Mussolini's **March on Rome**, and prompted to act by the intensified atmosphere of crisis brought about by the **French occupation of the Ruhr**, Hitler and his supporters attempted to seize power by violence in Munich in November 1923. At a meeting in one of Munich's most famous beer halls on 8 November, in the presence of leading Bavarian politicians and generals who were also opposed to the Weimar Republic, Hitler announced that 'the national revolution' had begun. The **SA** took over the headquarters of the army in Munich, and the next day about 2,000 Nazis marched on the centre of the city.

The attempted coup was short-lived, however. A brief gun battle took place and a number were killed on both sides before Hitler and the other organisers were arrested. Hitler was subsequently put on trial and sent to prison and the Nazi Party was banned.

Aftermath

On the face of it, the coup was a complete failure. Above all, the army had chosen to remain loyal to the Republic, even though most of its officers were less than enthusiastic about democracy. The Nazi Party fell apart into squabbling factions, and other right-wing parties tried to fill the vacuum. The crisis of inflation eased with the introduction of a new currency, and support for radical politics subsided for the time being. Hitler's career might have ended at this point — certainly many at the time thought this to be the case.

But the short-term failure brought a number of long-term advantages.

■ First, Hitler had learned a vital lesson: that he would be better off working within the Weimar constitution in his pursuit of power. Accordingly, once released, he set about taking the legal route to power, with ultimate success.

■ Second, the coup, although a failure, did much to enhance Hitler's reputation among right-wing circles as a man of action, who was prepared to take whatever risks were necessary in pursuit of his goals. The trial itself provided Hitler with a platform on which to proclaim himself an ordinary patriot who had been forced to act out of love for his fatherland.

■ The fact that the Nazi Party fell apart without Hitler to lead it also demonstrated that Hitler himself occupied an increasingly important role on the far right. Ironically, it was the failed coup which marked the beginnings of the emergence of the image of Hitler as the undisputed Führer, or leader, of the far right.

During his time in prison, Hitler was also able to begin the writing of his main work of political philosophy, *Mein Kampf*, in which he lost no opportunity to project an image of himself as the man of action destined to lead Germany to restored greatness (see TWENTIETH CENTURY HISTORY REVIEW Vol. 1 No. 2, 'Hitler's *Mein Kampf*: a blueprint for genocide?')

In the years of relative stability that followed, Hitler set about establishing the Nazi Party as a national party, building its organisation across Germany. The Nazis remained a fringe grouping until 1930, their radical politics appearing unattractive to voters during these stable years. But as soon as a new crisis occurred, in the shape of the economic **depression**, Hitler was able to capitalise on the efforts of earlier years. And when ordinary Germans looked once again for a man of action to lead them out of the crisis, they remembered the man who had shown the necessary dynamism and enterprise in 1923. Tragically, while Hitler had learned the lessons of 1923, many ordinary Germans had not. This time, broad sections of society — including the army and other elite groupings — were willing to support his bid for power, with all the dreadful consequences this brought.

Dr Neil Gregor is Reader in Modern German History at the University of Southampton. His most recent book is the collection *Nazism, War and Genocide* (2nd edn, Exeter 2007).

Further reading

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Gregor, N. (2005) *How to Read Hitler*, Granta.

Kershaw, I. (1998) *Hitler. Hubris 1889–1936*, Norton.

Nicholls, A. J. (2000) *Weimar and the Rise of Hitler* (4th edn), Macmillan.