



The rise of the Nazis 1919–29

Lisa Pine

He led one small fringe group among many others, and his attempt to seize power was a fiasco. What was the secret of Hitler's success?

November criminals: those responsible for betraying the army and signing the Treaty of Versailles on behalf of Germany.

Treaty of Versailles: unpopular peace treaty imposed upon Germany by the victorious Allies in 1919.

The 'Brown House', Munich, headquarters of the Nazi Party.

One of the key debates surrounding the rise of Nazism is whether it arose as part of a continuation of German history — that is, modern Germany followed a 'special path' of development whose logical conclusion was Nazism — or whether it came about as the result of a particular set of circumstances and crises which created the conditions in which Nazism could take root and flourish. Historian Jill Stephenson has compared the second scenario to an 'industrial accident' and referred to it as 'dropping a spanner in the works'. The origins of Nazism, both as ideology and as a political movement, partly dated back to the period before the First World War. A proliferation of extreme nationalist, radical right-wing political groups and organisations sprang up in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth.

However, the history of the radical right in Germany was deeply influenced by the First World War and the postwar circumstances of defeat and revolution, out of which the Weimar Republic was

born. The period of social and economic crisis between 1918 and 1923 fostered the rise of new radical right organisations in Germany, including the Nazi Party. Such groups promoted the 'stab in the back' legend, maintaining that the German army had not been defeated on the battlefield, but had been betrayed by the 'November criminals'. The new republic had brought defeat on the country and signed the unpopular **Treaty of Versailles**, imposed upon Germany by the victorious allies. The Weimar Republic overcame its initial problems and, under the direction of **Gustav Stresemann**, Germany's economy improved, as did its status in Europe. Indeed, the period between 1923 and 1929 was known as the 'halcyon years' or 'golden years' of the republic, yet it was during this time that the Nazi Party was organising itself, in some respects in the background, as people enjoyed relative stability.

Establishment of the Nazi Party and Hitler's role

The German Workers' Party (DAP) was founded in 1919 by Anton Drexler and Karl Harrer. It aimed to draw German workers away from the political left. It was one of more than 70 radical right-wing organisations, completely unremarkable until the combination of Hitler's leadership and the crisis of 1929 pushed it into a more prominent political position. Hitler joined the party in 1919 and his early association with the party was crucial to its future success. In 1920, the party changed its name to the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) or Nazi Party and established its 25-point programme. In 1921, Hitler resigned from the party in fury, after an attempt by Drexler to merge it with other groups without informing him. As Hitler was already the party's main speaker and the party realised its chances of power lay with him, his return was negotiated, but under terms which gave him complete control of the movement. Hence, Hitler managed to oust Drexler as party leader very quickly.



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In 1921, the party established its own newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter* (*People's Observer*), and its own paramilitary organisation, the SA. This was significant, because all the established political parties had their own newspapers and paramilitary groups. Hitler's speeches attracted crowds from the Bavarian right wing and party membership continued to grow. However, without influential support and contacts, the Nazi Party would have remained on the fringes of German politics and Hitler would have remained a beer-hall rabble-rouser. Hitler was fortunate enough to gain an entrée into Munich salon society through early converts to Nazism, such as the Lehmann and Bruckstein families. The Nazis also received protection from the police, judiciary and army leadership. This support and patronage enabled Hitler and the NSDAP to move to a position of prominence within the radical right.

The failure of the Beer Hall Putsch

In 1923, the Nazi Party planned a **putsch**, but Hitler knew he did not have enough influence to do this alone, so he acted as a 'drummer' for authoritarian nationalism, persuading key right-wing political and military figures in Bavaria to back the rising. On 8 November 1923, Gustav von Kahr, the state commissioner of Bavaria, was addressing a meeting at the largest beer hall in Munich. Hitler stormed in and tried to force those present to adopt his own plans for a takeover of the national government. But Kahr and Hitler's supporters in the Bavarian government and military circles had their own agenda and quickly abandoned him, and in the event, Hitler's attempted putsch of 8–9 November ended in fiasco. Hitler's men marched into Munich's city centre, but the police fired on them and the putsch collapsed. Hitler was tried for treason and imprisoned at Landsberg Castle for 5 years, but he served only 9 months. The Nazi Party broke up. While in prison, Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* (1924) and revised his strategy. He realised that the only way to obtain power was legally and that he would need to persuade the German electorate to vote for him. After his release, Hitler consolidated and reaffirmed his control over the refounded NSDAP.

Organisation of the Nazi Party

During the years 1925–28, Hitler's position within the party as undisputed Führer (leader) emerged, despite challenges from **Ernst Röhm** and Otto Strasser. The party worked hard on recruitment, organisation, fundraising and canvassing. From 1928, Gregor Strasser was in charge of party organisation. The party was organised from the centre down into regions (*Gaue*), each headed by a regional leader (*Gauleiter*). The party also had a horizontal organisational structure. This took the form of associations for different social or occupa-

Early developments within the Nazi Party

- 1919** German Workers' Party (DAP) set up by Anton Drexler and Karl Harrer.
- 1919** Hitler joins the German Workers' Party.
- 1920** Party changes its name to National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP).
- 1920** 25-point programme.
- 1921** Hitler manoeuvres himself into the leadership position within the party.
- 1921** Party sets up its own newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*.
- 1921** Party sets up its paramilitary wing, the SA.
- 1923** Munich Beer Hall Putsch.
- 1924** Hitler writes *Mein Kampf*.

tional groups, such as doctors, teachers, lawyers, students and war veterans.

Propaganda

The Nazi Party exploited popular fears and prejudices, using modern technology to disseminate its messages. It posed as the party that would protect Germany from the threat of communist revolution, capitalising on popular concerns about increasing numbers of votes for the German Communist Party (KPD). In particular, the SA could be seen in the streets, taking part in brawls and fights with communists. Historian Richard Bessel has described this SA presence in itself as propaganda for the Nazi cause, for, while some people were alarmed by the violence, many were pleased that a stance was being taken against communism. The Nazi Party also used posters, leaflets, parades and rallies to full effect.

Hitler and other Nazi leaders toured Germany to canvass voters both in the cities and in the countryside. Hitler's public appearances were carefully orchestrated and stage-managed by Josef Goebbels (later to become Nazi minister for propaganda) and Hitler's campaigns had a powerful impact. He was able to manipulate the emotions of his mass audiences. Hitler used simple messages and slogans. At this time, he attacked the Treaty of Versailles, Weimar decadence and corruption, Bolshevism and the Jews. However, Hitler's skills as an orator and his techniques for winning the masses could not have brought him power without the right circumstances and conditions. Without the Depression and the disintegration of the bourgeois liberal and conservative parties, the Nazi Party would not have become a mass movement, but would have continued to remain on the fringes of German politics, as it was in its infancy.

Gustav Stresemann: Weimar Germany's chancellor (1923) and foreign minister (1923–29).

SA: Sturmabteilung, the brown-shirted paramilitary storm trooper wing of the Nazi movement, which had gained a reputation for violence. Its leaders were eliminated by Hitler in the Night of the Long Knives, June 1934, after he came to see them as an obstacle to his power and his efforts to win over the army.

putsch: attempted take-over of power by armed force.

Ernst Röhm (1887–1934): organised the SA and was murdered in the Night of the Long Knives.



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Hitler at a Nuremberg rally, 2–5 August 1929.

Voters

The other important development between 1925 and 1929 was therefore the change in the party political landscape. During these years, people drifted away from traditional political parties and became associated instead with other groups, such as the NSDAP. This undermined the mainstream political parties so that, by the late 1920s, support for the parties of the political centre had fallen away. The Nazis capitalised on this trend. The voter potential for the NSDAP before 1929 was very small, mainly because it tried to address itself to the urban working class, which showed no interest in its message and remained firmly affiliated to the German Socialist Party (SPD) and the German Communist Party (KPD). In the 1928

Weimar Republic (1918–33)

February 1919 The German Federal Republic, named for the town of Weimar, where the National Constituent Assembly met.

It had a constitution that provided for:

- presidential office lasting 7 years
- parliament with an upper and a lower house (i.e. bicameral)
- proportional representation

1919–25 Friedrich Ebert first president.

1920 Assembly returned to Berlin.

1925–33 Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg served as president.

Wall Street Crash: collapse of New York stock market in 1929 and starting point of the Great Depression.

Key points

- ✦ The period of social and economic crisis between 1918 and 1923 fostered the rise of new radical right organisations in Germany.
- ✦ Without influential support and contacts, the Nazi Party would have remained on the fringes of German politics and Hitler would have remained a beer-hall rabble-rouser.
- ✦ As the established political parties had their own newspapers and paramilitary groups, the Nazi Party increased its significance in 1921 by establishing its own newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, and its own paramilitary organisation, the SA.
- ✦ The Nazi Party exploited popular fears and prejudices, posing as the party that would protect Germany from communist revolution threatened by increasing support for the German Communist Party.
- ✦ Hitler's public appearances were stage-managed and he used simple messages and slogans to manipulate the emotions of his mass audiences.
- ✦ Hitler's skills as an orator could not have brought him power without the Depression and the disintegration of the bourgeois liberal and conservative parties.
- ✦ The essential preconditions for Hitler's success were widespread disillusionment with the parliamentary system, which increased Nazi Party votes from 1929 onwards, and the intrigues of right-wing politicians surrounding President Hindenburg.

election the NSDAP attracted only 2.8% of the vote. It was only in 1929 that the NSDAP realised it might do better to target the rural middle class. In particular, the **Wall Street Crash** left both the finances and the status of the middle class in ruins. The Nazi Party was now able to attract increasing numbers of voters and was set to become a truly mass movement.

Was Hitler's accession to power inevitable?

In conclusion, Hitler's accession to power was not inevitable. The essential preconditions for his success were widespread disillusionment with the parliamentary system, which allowed the Nazi Party to take in so many voters from 1929 onwards, and ultimately, the intrigues of right-wing politicians surrounding President Hindenburg. But, as historian Detlev Peukert argued, by 1929, Weimar democracy was already damaged and on its way to being completely destroyed.

Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg (1847–1934)

- 1866** Commissioned as a Guards officer. Twice decorated for bravery in his career.
- 1911** Retired from active service.
- August 1914** Recalled to command the Eighth Army in East Prussia and victorious over the Russians.
- November 1914** Put in command of the entire German Eastern Front.
- 1916** Created chief of the Greater German General Staff.
- March 1918** Wrote terms of Treaty of Brest Litovsk ending German war with Russia on the Eastern Front.
- October 1918** Sought an armistice on the German Western Front against Britain, France and the US, and advised Kaiser Wilhelm II to abdicate.
- July 1919** Retired once again.
- April 1925** Elected president of Weimar Republic.



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The NSDAP did not emerge from nowhere. It was one of dozens of similar radical right-wing organisations that sprang up in Germany in the aftermath of the First World War. The years 1919–29 were important for the Nazi Party, in terms of its capability to attract mass votes which ensured that the Party became the decisive factor in German politics in the political, social and economic crises of the early 1930s. Its ability to take advantage of circumstances as they arose eventually tipped Hitler into power.

The Nazi Party progressed in its early years with the help of individuals in political and military circles more powerful than itself. Hitler's access to Munich high society was very important in the early 1920s and lent his party respectability. Without this patronage and support, the NSDAP could not have become prominent. Throughout the 1920s, the Nazi Party capitalised on the political, economic and social problems encountered by the Weimar Republic. Its new political style and determination marked it out from other parties and organisations.

Through the strength of its leader, its tight organisational structure, its use of propaganda and its exploitation of modern technology, the Nazi Party was able to take root and grow in the Germany of the 1920s, so that when the time and

circumstances were right, in January 1933, Hitler was able to become chancellor. But throughout the entire decade of the 1920s — and arguably right up until the moment Hindenburg invited him to become chancellor — this was at no time inevitable.

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Further study

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Reich President Paul von Hindenburg, 1932.