

## Hitler's Rise to Power

Throughout the course of the Weimar Republic, ideological differences and economic instability consistently challenged the well-being of the nation. This turmoil gave the charismatic Nazi leader Adolph Hitler an avenue to continue the polarization of society away from democracy. With the youthful appeal of his Nazi party, preaching anti-Semitic and nationalist rhetoric, his condemnation of Weimar society and his promise of a better future, Hitler's vision resonated with a wide audience.

Weimar's problems began from the onset with the defeat of Germany in World War I. Many German citizens, including Ernst von Salomon, were puzzled over this defeat. After the war, he observed that the "army...had done its duty to the best of its ability. It had won brilliant victories, but the luster of those victories now became unbearable – now that the war was lost, yet the army had not been defeated. The front had been held..." (Salomon, cited in Sax and Kuntz, p. 30).

Many Germans took refuge from this paradox by accepting the army's "stab in the back" theory. According to this theory, the Social Democratic party and the Jews who were a part of this party were responsible for Germany's loss because they signed the Versailles Treaty that ended the war (Spielvogel, p. 12). This treaty restricted Weimar from having an army over one hundred thousand men and banned it from having either military or naval air forces. Worse than

these conditions were Weimar's loss of self-determination and its forced acceptance of sole responsibility for "causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments...have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies" (Versailles Treaty, cited in Sax and Kuntz, pp. 48-50).

Signing this treaty created a rocky foundation for the new republic, in which the only consensus seemed to be that everybody opposed this treaty. Historian Jackson Spielvogel explains that "to many Germans the Weimar Republic appeared only as a temporary alternative" (Spielvogel, p. 12). Even before this treaty was concluded in June 1919, the coalition government headed by the Social Democrats was forced to contend with several coup attempts. In order to quash Liebknecht's Communist uprising in November 1918, the first of many coup attempts that would continue to threaten the Weimar government, Chancellor Friedrich Ebert sought help from Quarter Master General of the Army Wilhelm Groener. Wanting to prevent a radical, left-wing government from coming to power, Groener's autocratic, right-wing military agreed to help Ebert because they saw that the government was "ready to take up the fight against radicalism and Bolshevism" (Groener, cited in Sax and Kuntz, p. 32).

While the Ebert-Groener pact helped to crush this and other Communist coup attempts, it severely undermined the country's developing democracy. The pact provided security to the Social Democratic government, but it acquiesced to

the military's desire to remain outside of parliamentary control (Sax and Kuntz, p. 32). In addition to this loss of control, the democratic government was unable to reform the old values of judges, teachers, or bureaucrats (Spielvogel, pp. 14-15). Weimar, therefore, was a nation founded on a democratic ideology that had little influence over its people or its institutions.

Weimar also had a shortage of great leaders to help transform the views of these institutions (Spielvogel, p. 12). Weak coalition governments formed within the *Reichstag* made it especially difficult to govern the country effectively. This was due to an abundance of "splinter" parties that were given proportional representation in the parliament (Sax and Kuntz, p. 53). Also weakening the foundation of the Weimar government was the ability of the president to suspend the parliament and rule by decree in the event of an emergency. According to this provision, Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution, "the Reich president can, if the public safety and order of the German Reich are seriously disturbed or endangered, take such measures as are deemed necessary to restore public safety and order" (Weimar Constitution, cited in Sax and Kuntz, p. 54).

Strong tensions also existed between left and right wing forces over whether Germany should fulfill or not fulfill the reparations it agreed to pay in the Versailles Treaty. As Acting Chancellor Bauer explained during the debate on whether to accept the Versailles Treaty, "the imposed conditions exceed the limits of Germany's ability to comply" (Bauer, cited in Sax and Kuntz, p. 46). By 1923,

this inability to pay was illustrated much clearer when France invaded the German Ruhr region because of the Weimar government's default on the reparations payments. This invasion prompted the workers of the Ruhr region to go on strike, rather than work for their enemy. In exchange for their loyalty, Weimar printed more money to support their courageous resistance. The influx of new money into the German economy, however, had disastrous consequences. Hyperinflation, which followed this act, further undermined the government and its dwindling democratic following (Spielvogel, pp. 15-16). As historian Jackson Spielvogel explains, "Economic woes pushed the middle class, already hesitant to ally with the republic, increasingly toward the rightist parties, which were hostile to the republic. Lower-middle-class people's fear of entering the ranks of the working classes opened them to extremist views (Spielvogel, p. 16)."

Reich Currency Commissioner Hjalmar Schacht's introduction of the new *Rentenmark* currency to replace Germany's devalued currency helped to stabilize the economic system of the nation. Over the next several years, Weimar's economy continued to improve with the Dawes plan that put the reparations payments on a "sliding scale" based upon Germany's ability to pay (Hjalmar Schacht, cited in Sax and Kuntz, p. 51). Short-term loans by the U.S. also helped their economy improve, while the Locarno Pact in 1925 welcomed the Germans back into the international community. Schacht credited Stresemann for succeeding in "enlisting Allied interest and co-operation to establish order in

German financial and economic affairs” and for his help with introducing the new German currency (Hjalmar Schacht, cited in Sax and Kuntz, p. 51). These improvements did not sway the middle class back towards democracy because they already had their savings wiped out under democratic rule (Spielvogel, p. 16). The tranquility that existed between 1924 and 1926 was short-lived.

By 1927, decreased production and rising unemployment began to disturb the German economy. Compounding these problems was the U.S. stock market crash on Wall Street in 1929 (Sax and Kuntz, p. 54). In a devastating move for Germany’s economy, the Wall Street crash prompted U.S. bankers to recall the loans that they had issued since 1924 (Spielvogel, p. 17). The Young Plan, announced in the same year to succeed the Dawes Plan, further weakened the German people’s confidence in democracy with the Germans now required to pay reparations into the 1980s.

According to historians Benjamin Sax and Dieter Kuntz, “these economic problems soon spilled over into the political arena, primarily because of disagreements between the partners of the Grand Coalition government over the issue of unemployment insurance payments” (Sax and Kuntz, p. 54). With the great number of coalition members, including the Social Democratic Party, the German Democratic Party, the Center Party, the Bavarian People’s Party, and the German People’s Party, reaching a compromise was impossible. With the breakdown of this coalition government in March 1930, President Paul von

Hindenburg appointed Heinrich Brüning of the Center Party as chancellor. Brüning's leadership did not help Weimar's woes and, in fact, served to further undermine and eliminate the nation's democracy. Brüning's ability to persuade von Hindenburg to impose Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution so that he could rule by decree eradicated the last traces of Weimar democracy (Sax and Kuntz, p. 54).

As chancellor, Brüning refused to create public works programs, fearing that "these measures would lead to an unstoppable devaluation of the mark. The nation would not be able to survive a second inflation, but would sink into chaos from which recovery would not be possible" (Brüning, cited in Sax and Kuntz, p. 57). Whether this was true or not, the nation could not survive with the existing twenty-percent unemployment rate that his deflationary measures fostered. For this reason, Spielvogel explains, "It was certainly not an accident that the Nazis and the Communists, extremists of right and left, had become two of the largest parties in the Reichstag by the end of 1930" (Spielvogel, p. 17).

The economic and political turmoil that characterized the Weimar Republic were at the forefront of Hitler's rise to power. His anti-Semitic, nationalist, and authoritarian agenda had far-reaching influence. The Nazis call for a "union of all Germans to form a Great Germany on the basis of the right of the self-determination enjoyed by nations" was the hope of all Germans. Hitler further increased his popularity by condemning the Weimar Republic for its signing of the

unpopular Versailles Treaty (Nazis' 25 Point Program, cited in Sax and Kuntz, p. 72). Hitler agreed with the army's "stab in the back" theory that blamed the Social Democrats and especially the Jews for Germany's wartime defeat (Spielvogel, p. 12). This theory fit conveniently with his ideology.

Since the creation of the Weimar Republic, support for the Nazis had been widespread. According to historian Michael Kater, "from 1919 to 1923 the Nazi Party, far from being a perfect mirror image of the social profile of the nation, contained, albeit in varying proportions, elements of every important social segment in the country so that it potentially assumed an integrative function in German society" (Kater, cited in Spielvogel, p. 34). Hitler's self-portrayal as a national patriot continued to help his image and his cause.

From the beginning, workers comprised 36 percent of the Nazis' party members. For this so-called worker's party, the worker's were underrepresented based upon the 55 percent of German society that were workers. These supporters were influenced by the party's nationalist goals and their promise of a better future (Spielvogel, p. 33). At the same time, Hitler's charisma and disdain for Weimar society attracted young men who were also disgruntled with the state of post-World War I Germany and who wanted to see some action (Spielvogel, p. 46). Lower middle class supporters made up slightly over half of the party's members. This group feared losing their status and becoming part of the working class due to the economic troubles of the Weimar government (Spielvogel, p. 16).

According to historian Jackson Spielvogel, “especially visible [with the Nazi ranks] were urban and later small-town and rural merchants and artisans who had suffered from the war and thought of themselves as victims of the republic’s economic policies” (Spielvogel, p. 34). Merchants, craftspeople, office clerks, and farmers especially enjoyed the anti-Semitic rhetoric of the party and its anti-Marxist stance. Hitler’s youthful and mostly male party also had a following within the upper classes. The Nazis also appealed to a small group of upper class members who liked the party’s anti-Semitism and its nationalist goals of expansion and their repudiation of the Versailles Treaty (Spielvogel, p. 34).

While the Nazis’ 25-point program outlined the party’s beliefs, Hitler’s plans for implementing them changed during the 1920s. After Hitler’s 1923 Beer Hall Putsch failed to achieve his goal of taking over Bavaria, he realized that he had to achieve power through legal means. Despite this setback, Hitler used this defeat to his advantage. His trial became a pulpit for his nationalist propaganda against the Treaty of Versailles and against the Weimar Republic. Hitler maintained, “I consider myself not a traitor but a German, who desired what was best for his people” (Hitler, cited in Spielvogel, p. 38). These sentiments struck a cord with the German people and they increased his popularity amongst them. He made the best of his short stay in prison for the coup attempt by using the time to write his memoir. In addition to the Nazis’ program, Hitler’s memoir served as a blueprint for his goals if he ever came to power (Spielvogel, p. 43). His coming to



power seemed to be a real possibility, too, as “agitation over the French in the Ruhr and inflationary pressures” in Weimar, helped to increase the Nazi following from 2000 members at the end of 1920 to 55,000 members at the end of 1923 (Spielvogel, p. 35).

Although “favorable economic, political, and social circumstances, and new members and supporters help to explain the growth of Nazism from 1920 to 1923,” Spielvogel asserts, “the role of Adolf Hitler remains crucial.” Spielvogel explains that Hitler “had the ability to sense and express the fears, hatreds, and hopes of his Munich listeners, whose worsening economic circumstances made them susceptible to Hitler’s emotional speeches against those supposedly responsible for Germany’s plight” (Spielvogel, p. 35). Evidence of his importance is seen in the disunity of his party during his short prison sentence. After his release, Hitler moved to quickly reassert his control over the Nazi party. His establishment of regional party leaders, district leaders, and chapter leaders within each German region served to increase the exposure of the party to a wider audience. Further aiding the Nazis quest for power were the SA paramilitary forces, which terrorized their Jewish and Marxist enemies, and the SS security forces within the SA (Spielvogel, p. 47).

With an increased focus on farmers who were hurt by the agricultural depression of the late 1920s, Nazi momentum continued to rise. Asserting that the farmers represented the “blood and soil” that made the German people great

improved the Nazis effectiveness in winning them over. The economic turmoil of the Great Depression made the Nazis anti-Semitism and nationalist platform more appealing to the lower middle and middle classes (Spielvogel, pp. 50-51). With the onset of the Great Depression, many small businesses were forced to close. The Nazis gained their support by blaming “big business and the economic profiteers who were ruining the middle classes. And they blamed the Jews, who allegedly stood behind Marxism, the Weimar system, much of big business, and economic profiteering” (Spielvogel, p.54). Spielvogel explains that “lower-middle-class unemployed and employed embraced a Nazi Party that promised to eliminate this corrupt Weimar system. With the Nazis joining forces with several right-wing, nationalist groups in 1929 to oppose the Young Plan, their party achieved a measure of legitimacy (Spielvogel, pp. 51-52). Shortly afterwards, the Nazis became the largest party in the country.

With twenty-percent of the German population unemployed, the nation was polarized away from Weimar democracy, towards the extreme left and the extreme right. Since the Communists were growing in strength, President von Hindenburg was forced to rethink his opposition to Hitler as chancellor. Believing that Hitler could be controlled as chancellor with only three Nazi cabinet positions, Chancellor Franz von Papen convinced Hindenburg to name Hitler as chancellor on 30 January 1933 (Spielvogel, pp. 65-66). Once in power, Hitler used Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution to consolidate his power, under a shield of legitimacy.