

History 369

Paper

Hitler's Attainment of Power: The Most  
Important Development in Early 20<sup>th</sup>  
Century Germany

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The period 1914 to 1945 was a tumultuous time for the young German state which, in the view of Stefan Berger, was like a roller coaster ride with many highs and lows.<sup>1</sup> Many events were of such significance that it is utterly impossible to imagine Germany, or the world, if they had occurred differently. However, one such event marked a very sudden inflection point, a development which effectively killed an era overnight and birthed another. Its importance lies in how much it influenced the future, and the sharp *change* in direction it took the German state over a very short time. I argue that the emergence of Hitler, along with a backdrop of Nazi rise, was the most important development in Germany; the magnitude of this upheaval in the political, economic, and sociocultural spheres squarely places Hitler's attainment of power as the defining moment of the first half of Germany's twentieth century.

I stress that the significance of Hitler's rise lies in how the Germany which entered 1933 emerged completely different. The political transformation was stark and jarring; it was not even a transition between governments, but between government *systems*. Shortly after Hitler's appointment to the chancellorship in January 1933, in March, after a "combination of terror [perpetrated by the Nazi SA and SS] and specious pledges,"<sup>2</sup> Hitler successfully secured a two-thirds majority vote and passed the Enabling Act, which formally ended Weimar democracy and gave him complete power. Nazi roots had already begun to take hold, often forcefully, all over Germany with the takeover of local administration – officials like Hermann Goering led purges of the civil service and police, injecting them with loyal Nazi officials.<sup>3</sup> Germany had transformed. Weimar was a plural, democratic, but clumsy representative republic that had all

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<sup>1</sup> Stefan Berger, "Germany," in *Twisted Paths: Europe 1914-1945*, edited by Robert Gerwarth, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 184.

<sup>2</sup> David G. Williamson, *The Third Reich*, (Milton: Taylor and Francis, 2018), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 27.

forms of political diversity, from the Communist KPD on the left to religious conservatives on the right; suddenly, almost overnight, Germany was a one-party system governed by the personality cult of *Führerprinzip*,<sup>4</sup> driven by the need to push for an ominous “uniformity of opinion and action.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Berger asserts that by 1936 “almost all resistance groups ... had been infiltrated by the Gestapo”<sup>6</sup> and that its members were either dead or interned.<sup>7</sup> It is hard to overstate the absolute magnitude of this kind political change – Hitler’s rise had taken Germany to another political universe.

Other change is more nuanced, but just as significant. Before Hitler’s rise, Germany had two glaring characteristics: crushing economic hardship, and the sociocultural dominance of the conservative right. In 1932, Germany was still reeling from the catastrophic effects of the Great Depression: unemployment was adversely affecting 20 million people<sup>8</sup> and industrial production had fallen by 42%.<sup>9</sup> It is important to keep in mind that this hardship, in all its pervasive forms, had begun in October 1929 when the US stock market collapsed – not only did this paralyze business and trade worldwide, but it also destroyed the Dawes and Young Plans<sup>10</sup> which Germany relied on to pay the war reparations dictated by Versailles. By 1932 Germans had been subject to economic depravity for several years. In February 1933, Hitler introduced 4-year

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<sup>4</sup> David Welch, *Hitler: Profile of a Dictator*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 42.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>6</sup> Stefan Berger, “Germany,” in *Twisted Paths: Europe 1914-1945*, edited by Robert Gerwarth, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 193.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Frank McDonough, *Hitler and the Rise of the Nazi Party*, (London: Routledge, 2017), 14.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

economic plans that were designed for economic recovery<sup>11</sup> - debate can be had on whether they were good plans, or if they were only for public popularity. Ultimately, however, as Ian Kershaw states, “the most remarkably rapid economic recovery took place exactly where the Depression had been deepest;”<sup>12</sup> suddenly, the economic situation in Germany began to look up. A combination of spending and beneficial policies on infrastructure, militarization, agriculture, and manufacturing<sup>13</sup> meant that there was a labor *shortage*, rather than unemployment, by the middle of the decade.<sup>14</sup> However, not all of it was a result of explicit Nazi policy – the rise of Hitler coincided with the nadir of the Great Depression, and thus not all recovery thereafter can be credited to him.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, this was ultimately unsustainable – the spending on military and heavy industry, and the drive for autarky, all necessitated territorial expansion, attributing some of the economic ripples of World War II to Hitler as well. For the time being, however, it was undoubtedly true that following Hitler’s rise came dramatic (and temporary) upturns in economic fortunes for the entire country.

There were many sociocultural nuances in this period, but a critical role was played by the conservative right, and it is worthwhile to analyze how Hitler and Nazism interfaced with this pillar of German society. World War I was fought in a chronological transition phase – a conflict which was born out of the fires of nationalism and statehood consuming the old and fragile empires. Germany, of course, was no exception, with the Kaiser only abdicating at the end of the conflict. However, conservatism stayed, even during the turbulent and progressive times of

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<sup>11</sup> Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914-1945*, (Penguin Books, 2016), 223.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 225.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Weimar. The *Freikorps*, the fearsome paramilitary group violently defiant against “democratic egalitarianism and communist internationalism”<sup>16</sup> and who portrayed themselves as representing “the eternal values of the nation”<sup>17</sup> played a key conservative role in Weimar politics, often used by democrats like Friedrich Ebert as a brutish counter to the rising influence of the left. In the same vein, the failure of the republic to provide the economic backing for countless German veterans harbored significant blame and pushed them to the anti-republican conservative right,<sup>18</sup> and likely further right still to Nazism. Even right up to the eve of Hitler’s rise, conservatives like Paul von Hindenburg were very much in power,<sup>19</sup> constitutionally approving Hitler’s chancellorship. All in all, the conservative right, to some extent relics of an era before Weimar, still held vast amounts of power in Germany. They retained in German culture an omnipresent anti-republican sentiment, and they anchored a large part of German society, one that was relatively constant in a time of new governments and political ideas. The Nazis were, of course, right wing – but they lacked the conservative element. Hitler’s popularity stemmed from a Nazi commitment – possibly genuine or for propaganda, probably both – to reform society. Nazi themes included “positive proletarian images,”<sup>20</sup> and an emphasis on the importance of industrial workers and farmers;<sup>21</sup> they also introduced holidays like the International Labor

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 123.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Stefan Berger, “Germany,” in *Twisted Paths: Europe 1914-1945*, edited by Robert Gerwarth, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 195.

<sup>19</sup> David Welch, *Hitler: Profile of a Dictator*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 25.

<sup>20</sup> Stefan Berger, “Germany,” in *Twisted Paths: Europe 1914-1945*, edited by Robert Gerwarth, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 201.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Day.<sup>22</sup> They appealed to many social classes, and in this sense, Nazism was very unlike traditional conservatism. Under Hitler, and again almost overnight, the conservatives were no longer such a defining social aspect of Germany and were more or less subordinate to the Nazis. They still staffed critical institutions like the military, but in general they had been socially supplanted (albeit very gently, such that conservatives did not view Nazism as an existential threat) by a perplexing combination of daring economic change, the elevation of the working class, and a well-oiled propaganda machine dictating who was now at the top. Old conservatism would crop up here and there – for example the July 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler<sup>23</sup> – but just like how he had done with the government and economy, Hitler rapidly altered their position in society and culture.

In this short essay I have tried to adopt a narrative that centers on abrupt change in Germany. When we define the important events in history, we center on those which have turned the world upside down – years in which the world becomes drastically transformed. The rise of Hitler has an importance that cannot be downplayed, with far-reaching and jarring consequences for all aspects of Germany – political, economic, and sociocultural. There certainly was no other comparable event in Germany between 1914 and 1945 that reached the breadth and magnitude of the change Hitler, and 1933, delivered.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 193.

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