

HIEU 3390: Nazi Germany

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Ms. Ariel Cohen: Friday 11:00-11:50am

“On my honor as a student I have neither given nor  
received aid on this assignment.”

A myriad of factors led to the Nazi Party's rise to power in 1933. Financial duress, problems within the Weimar democracy, the Nazis' appealing platform, the Party's organizational strength, and Adolf Hitler's leadership skills are five crucial factors that fueled the Nazis' accession to rule. Each factor played its own key role in not only undermining the Weimar democracy's success, but also creating the environment in which Nazism could thrive to spawn one of the most infamously powerful regimes in modern history.

The 1920s harbored immense economic challenges that propelled Weimar Germany's fall and the Nazis' consequential rise. "Weimar's economy suffered from an inherent instability, and like any unstable structure required only a relatively small push to bring down the whole structure."<sup>1</sup> Benz's statement had merit. First and foremost, the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 was catastrophic for the German economy and therefore the Weimar democracy. The Treaty required Germany to pay steep reparations for the Great War, crippling its economy by stalling industrial production. Because of war debts, demobilization, and the immense costs of reparations, Germany defaulted on the reparations.<sup>2</sup> This led to hyperinflation.<sup>3</sup> French and Belgian soldiers occupied the Ruhr in 1923 to force Germany to pay.<sup>4</sup> After deliberating between taxes or loans, the government decided to print more money to fund its obligations while the German Papiermark continued to lose value.<sup>5</sup> The Weimar democracy adopted the Dawes Plan in 1925, which allowed Germany to pay reparations with borrowed money from the United States.<sup>6</sup> This move sustained Germany enough to allow for advances in certain professional industries. "The Weimar years...saw an explosion of creativity across a wide range of scientific and artistic

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<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang Benz, *A Concise History of the Third Reich* (Berkeley, CA: UC Press, 2006), [Page 47].

<sup>2</sup> Manuela Achilles, "Democracy and Civil War" (lecture, February 6, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Achilles, "Democracy and Civil."

<sup>4</sup> Achilles, "Democracy and Civil."

<sup>5</sup> Achilles, "Democracy and Civil."

<sup>6</sup> Achilles, "Democracy and Civil."

fields.”<sup>7</sup> Fulbrook argued that there were some positive aspects of Weimar Germany; regardless of its choice to rely on loans, they allowed for some modernization. Another blow to Germany’s economy was the Great Depression starting in 1929, which caused the United States to recall the loans to Germany under the Dawes Plan.<sup>8</sup> These loans had been virtually the only source of German industrial production, so their recall accelerated unemployment.<sup>9</sup> In 1928, 650,000 people were unemployed, and by 1930, the number jumped to 3 million.<sup>10</sup> The Treaty of Versailles necessitated Germany’s adoption of the Dawes Plan, the Depression ensured the end of the Dawes Plan, and this in turn ceased Germany’s brief period of economic progress after World War 1. These financial failures were instrumental in creating the political climate ripe for the growth of parties such as the Nazis, which pledged a new era of prosperity and employment.

The Weimar democracy itself had multiple weaknesses that generated the conditions for a new party, namely the Nazis, to gain prominence. One flaw lay in President Hindenburg who, although a decorated war general and respected leader among the German people, did not particularly understand the Weimar constitution.<sup>11</sup> In particular, Hindenburg was not wedded to democratic values. In Fulbrook’s words, “Hindenburg was not in principle committed to upholding and strengthening the democratic system...he made little secret of his intention to replace it with a more authoritarian political system as soon as was practicable.”<sup>12</sup> This notion was reflected through his fictional pioneering of the “stab-in-the-back” myth. “Our repeated proposals for strict discipline and strict legislation were not adopted...an English general said

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *A History of Germany 1918-2008: The Divided Nation* (n.p.: Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), [Page 33].

<sup>8</sup> Manuela Achilles, "Collapse of Democracy/Rise of the Nazis" (lecture, February 13, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Achilles, "Collapse of Democracy/Rise."

<sup>10</sup> Achilles, "Collapse of Democracy/Rise."

<sup>11</sup> Manuela Achilles, "Nazi Ideology" (lecture, February 13, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Fulbrook, *A History*, [Page 41].

with justice: 'The German army was stabbed in the back.'"<sup>13</sup> Hindenburg highlighted his distaste for Weimar democrats in power and showcased his manipulative nature through this myth. Although Hindenburg's leadership was a flaw in the Weimar democracy, other politicians had positive effects on Weimar Germany. Under President Ebert's leadership prior to Hindenburg, extremism was at bay; the Nazi party was marginalized, and Hitler was imprisoned.<sup>14</sup> Foreign Minister Stresemann enacted currency reform, helped Germany join the League of Nations, and shared the Nobel Peace Prize for reconciling France and Germany.<sup>15</sup> The government awarded funerals for Weimar officials such as Rathenau (1922), Ebert (1925), and Stresemann (1929).<sup>16</sup> A plurality of Weimar officials attended these funerals, and "this extension of access to state honors reflects a significant degree of democratization."<sup>17</sup> Simultaneously, however, there was disagreement between officials from various parties about the ornamentation, memorabilia, flag colors, and statue plans for Rathenau's funeral.<sup>18</sup> This discord is representative of the vicious political fragmentation throughout Weimar's reign due to proportional representation. By 1928, there were roughly seven parties (the KPD, SPD, DDP, DVP, Zentrum, DNVP, and NSDAP).<sup>19</sup> Although the "Great Coalition," which consisted of the SPD, DDP, Zentrum, and DVP, had worked well together throughout the 1920s, disputes over unemployment benefits led to its collapse in 1930, reflecting parliamentary paralysis.<sup>20</sup> This harsh political fragmentation resulting from parliamentary paralysis, which had fluctuated throughout the 1920s and climaxed in 1930,

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Von Hindenburg, interview by Parliamentary Investigatory Committee, November 18, 1919.

<sup>14</sup> Achilles, "Nazi Ideology."

<sup>15</sup> Achilles, "Nazi Ideology."

<sup>16</sup> Manuela Achilles, *Reforming the Reich* (n.p.: Berghahn Books, 2010), [Page 180].

<sup>17</sup> Achilles, *Reforming the Reich*, [Page 181].

<sup>18</sup> Achilles, *Reforming the Reich*, [Page 182].

<sup>19</sup> Achilles, "Collapse of Democracy/Rise."

<sup>20</sup> Ariel Cohen, "Weimar Germany Discussion" (lecture, February 8, 2019).

worked with coups and political murders to reshape German politics.<sup>21</sup> The Kapp Putsch, murders of Erzberger and Rathenau, and Beer Hall Putsch highlighted the political chaos in Weimar Germany while reflecting a trajectory towards right-wing nationalism.<sup>22</sup> Although women could vote, there were no property or education restrictors, and democratic icons such as Rathenau, Stresemann, and Ebert existed during the Weimar era, the political landscape's instability gave the Nazis' potential to rise to power. Additionally, Weimar's free speech policy, although democratic, permitted the Nazis to fully express their extremist views.

While the Treaty of Versailles and Weimar's weaknesses shook German pride to its core, the Nazis' platform promised not only a return to Germany's former glory, but also a heightened version of this glory; they wanted global German hegemony.<sup>23</sup> This ultra-nationalism approach appealed to the German masses, who felt the Treaty of Versailles treated the country unfairly. Furthermore, Hitler offered a scapegoat: "The allegedly powerful and wealthy Jews were held responsible for the negative accompaniments of rapid industrialization and modernization."<sup>24</sup> Hitler blamed the Jews for virtually all aspects of Germany's failures, which he expressed in speeches, propaganda, and *Mein Kampf*. These accusations included "the 'stab in the back' and the revolution which had allegedly resulted in Germany's defeat..."<sup>25</sup> The German people, deprived of their patriotism and vastly unemployed, likely took comfort in Hitler's exclamations that the problems were not the fault of Germany, but rather of the Jews, gays, and other minorities who were not "Aryan." "At home Germans failed to understand the defeat [during WW1], regarding it as a humiliation and national disgrace...[which] triggered the longing for

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<sup>21</sup> Cohen, "Weimar Germany."

<sup>22</sup> Achilles, "Democracy and Civil."

<sup>23</sup> Achilles, "Collapse of Democracy/Rise."

<sup>24</sup> Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Ipperman, *The Racial State: Germany 1933-1945* (n.p.: Cambridge University Press, 1991), [Page 37].

<sup>25</sup> Burleigh and Ipperman, *The Racial*, [Page 37].

new German greatness in a Third Reich.”<sup>26</sup> Additionally, Germans widely accepted the Nazis’ anti-communist approach. Outside of the far-left, Germans feared the rise of communism due to class struggles.<sup>27</sup> The Nazi Party platform, with its nationalistic, anti-Semitic, and anti-communist stances, appealed to the masses by promising a return to Germany’s former glory without influence from outsiders. Not only did the Nazis deliver clear and effective messages, but they also leveraged their immense and effective organization to spread them.

The Nazi Party’s organizational strength and strategy factored heavily into its rise to power. One element the Nazi Party honed was its exceptional talent at infiltrating existing associations.<sup>28</sup> These included beer halls, church groups, local governments, and others across Germany. After penetrating such groups, the Nazis would elevate to positions of power in them and then puppeteer other members as well as elucidate their views in their communities.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the Nazi organization strategically crafted symbols and messages to enhance the party’s appeal. The Nazi flag, for example, embodied attention to symbolism and culture that heavily outshined that of the Weimar democracy. Nazi Party members, along with the SA, wore their flag frequently and proudly. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler describes the flag’s symbolism: “The red expressed the social thought underlying the movement. White the national thought. And the swastika signified the mission allotted to us - the struggle for the victory of Aryan mankind and at the same time the triumph of the ideal of creative work which is in itself and always will be anti-Semitic.”<sup>30</sup> The flag was a strategic masterpiece; it was a simple yet powerful symbol that

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<sup>26</sup> Benz, *A Concise*, [Page 8]

<sup>27</sup> Achilles, "Collapse of Democracy/Rise."

<sup>28</sup> Achilles, "Collapse of Democracy/Rise."

<sup>29</sup> Achilles, "Collapse of Democracy/Rise."

<sup>30</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (n.p.: Eher Verlag, 1925), [Page 384].

reflected the Nazis' goals and promises to the people. Nazi propaganda also played a part in spreading the party's views.



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For example, the above piece, titled “The German Student,” roughly translates to “Come fight for the leader and work for the nation under the NSD student federation.” It portrays a smiling, youthful, well-dressed Aryan man, illustrating the ideal German image to appeal to other Germans to join the Nazis’ student federation. The man looks happy, organized, patriotic, and thus well off, clearly suggesting that future Nazi members could be like him, too. The strategy of marketing to the youth was another organizational decision that allowed the Nazis to gain mass support, especially during a time of economic and political stress in Weimar Germany. The Nazi party depicted their power and presence through the SA, a coalition of the Nazi party as the “people’s army.” The man in the propaganda above is wearing an SA-like outfit. The Nazis’ organizational strength and strategy, depicted through their infiltration of associations, use of symbolism in the flag and propaganda, and their SA, were critically important elements that appealed to the masses and propelled the party’s rise. Their leader, Hitler, leveraged this organizational strength to push the Nazis to power.

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<sup>31</sup> *Der Deutshce Student*, illustration, digital file.

Hitler had an infectious speaking voice which, during times of hardship, could answer German cries for help. Unlike Hindenburg, Hitler was youthful, forward-looking, and self-determined.<sup>32</sup> His charismatic leadership style and heartfelt speeches were quite persuasive. “All of Hitler’s early speeches would ultimately be concerned with making sense of Germany’s loss in the war...and attempt to draw up a blueprint for the creation of a Germany that would never again lose a war.”<sup>33</sup> His speeches echoed the Nazi platform, and the platform echoed his speeches. From the early ‘20s to the ‘30s, Hitler’s speeches were long and passionate. “One of the reasons Hitler gave such long speeches was a pragmatic one: he wanted to make sure that the party events at which he spoke were performative rather than discursive in nature.”<sup>34</sup> Hitler created an aura about himself as a savior for Germany. He needed not discuss his views with anyone; he provided the people with a performance that not only entertained them, but also reunited them with their faith for Germany that they had lost under Weimar rule. On top of portraying himself as Germans’ messiah, he created a false narrative of himself in *Mein Kampf*. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler reinvented himself; he described scenarios in which he struggled in the past that seemed heroic but were entirely false.<sup>35</sup> Hitler had his own salute, which became a customary greeting, giving him more legitimacy in the public’s eye.<sup>36</sup> By leading the Nazi party with empowering speeches and a bold salute, along with inventing a false past, Hitler made himself a god-like figure who created a passionate environment for Nazism to flourish.

There were five main factors that created conditions for the Nazis’ rise to power. First was economic duress from external events—the Treaty of Versailles and Great Depression—that

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<sup>32</sup> Achilles, "Collapse of Democracy/Rise."

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Weber, *Becoming Hitler* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2017), [Page 82-83].

<sup>34</sup> Weber, *Becoming Hitler*, [Page 196].

<sup>35</sup> Achilles, "Collapse of Democracy/Rise."

<sup>36</sup> Tilman Allert, *The Hitler Salute* (New York, NY: Picador, 2008).



Weimar could not control. Second, the Weimar democracy itself had problems. A different democratic system or political officials might have avoided or better managed these issues, but democratic free speech had to let Nazism express its views. The third factor, the appeal of the Nazis' platform, could not have been overcome by Weimar, given its own failed record and freedom of speech. Fourth is the Nazis' strength of organization and strategy, which the Weimar democracy could not have influenced. Finally, Hitler's leadership bolstered his rise. Although imprisoning him for a time, Weimar had no grounds to jail Hitler forever. Of these, the huge financial burden on Weimar Germany was the most important driver of the Nazis' rise. This burden initiated hardship, instability, and public alienation during Weimar's reign that ultimately laid the groundwork for the Nazis to prey upon and use to seize power with their immense organizational strength and charismatic leader.

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