

Hitler's Dictatorship

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30 January 1933, the date on which Hitler was made Chancellor in Germany, marked only the beginning of the Nazi seizure of power. Hitler had avoided the mistakes he had made ten years previously: he had achieved office constitutionally with the support of the conservative establishment and the army, not tried to do so by force of arms against their opposition. The question now was how to convert his position in yet another Weimar coalition cabinet into a dictatorship in a one-party state.

The Road to the Enabling Act

First, all Hitler could think of doing was to intensify the violence on the streets. He persuaded Papen to appoint Hermann Göring as Prussian Minister of the Interior, in which capacity Göring promptly enrolled the brownshirts as auxiliary police. They now went on the rampage, smashing trade union offices, beating up Communists, breaking up Social Democratic meetings. On 28 February chance came to the Nazis' aid: a lone Dutch anarcho-syndicalist, Marinus van der Lubbe, burned down the Reichstag building in protest against the injustices of unemployment. Hitler and Göring persuaded a willing cabinet effectively to suppress the Communist Party. 4,000 Communists, including virtually the entire party leadership, were immediately arrested, beaten up, tortured, and thrown into makeshift concentration camps; and there was no let-up in the campaign of violence and brutality in the weeks that followed. By the end of March the Prussian police reported that 20,000 Communists were in gaol, and by the summer over 100,000 Communists, Social Democrats, trade unionists and others had been arrested.

All of this was sanctioned by an emergency decree signed by Hindenburg, the night after the fire, suspending civil liberties and allowing the cabinet to take any necessary measures to protect public safety. Van der Lubbe's lone act was portrayed by Joseph Goebbels, soon to become Reich Propaganda Minister, as the result of a Communist conspiracy to stage an armed uprising. This convinced many middle-class voters that the decree was right.

Yet the government did not ban the Communists in a formal, legal sense, because it feared that the party's voters would all desert to the Social Democrats in the elections Hitler had called for 5 March. Amidst massive Nazi propaganda, paid for by a massive inflow of fresh funds from industry, and violent intimidation in which most rival political meetings were banned or broken up, the Nazis still failed to achieve an overall majority, peaking at 44 per cent and only getting over the 50 per cent barrier with the help of their conservative Nationalist coalition partners. The Communists still won 12 per cent and the Social Democrats 18 per cent, with the Catholic Centre Party holding firm at 11 per cent of the vote.

Hitler's cabinet was still far short of the two-thirds majority it needed to alter the constitution. But on 23 March 1933 they managed to get it by threatening civil war if they were frustrated, and by winning over the Catholic Centre Party deputies with the promise of a comprehensive agreement with the Papacy guaranteeing Catholics' rights. The so-called Enabling Act passed by the Reichstag that day gave the cabinet the right to rule by decree without reference either to the Reichstag or the President. Together with the Reichstag Fire decree, it provided the legal pretext for the creation of a dictatorship. Only the 94 Social Democratic deputies present voted against it. With Nazi stormtroopers shouting insults at the Social Democrats as they arrived, and lining the walls of the debating chamber inside, the atmosphere was heavy with intimidation. Knowing that he would lose, the Social Democrat leader Otto Wels gave a

dramatic speech promising that democracy would one day return. In his pocket he carried a cyanide capsule in case he was arrested and tortured after he left.

Opposition Groups

The Social Democrats and Communists between them had won 221 seats in the Reichstag elections of November 1932, as against 196 for the Nazis and another 51 for the Nazis' allies the Nationalists. But they failed completely to mount any concerted resistance to the Nazi seizure of power.

They were bitterly divided, with the Communists, under orders from Stalin in Moscow, labelling the Social Democrats 'Social Fascists' and arguing they were worse than the Nazis, and with the Social Democrats reluctant to co-operate with a party whose deviousness and unscrupulousness they rightly feared. Their paramilitary organisations fought hard against the Nazis on the streets, but they would have been no match for the army, which backed the Hitler government all the way in 1933, and their numbers were also well below those of the stormtroopers, who numbered more than three-quarters of a million in February 1933. The Social Democrats wanted to avoid bloodshed in this situation, and stayed true to their law-abiding traditions. The Communists believed that the Hitler government was the last gasp of a moribund capitalist system that would quickly collapse, opening the way to a proletarian revolution, so they saw no need to prepare for an uprising. And even if one had taken place, it would have suffered the fate of the Austrian socialist uprising against the Dollfuss dictatorship in February 1934, which was crushed by the Austrian army in a few days of fighting. Finally, a general strike was out of the question when unemployment stood at 35 per cent; striking workers would quickly have been replaced by unemployed people desperate to rescue themselves and their families from destitution.

Nevertheless, when all this is said, the labour movement caved in with surprising ease. Goebbels got the agreement of the trade union leaders to support the creation of a new national holiday on Mayday, a long-held demand of the unions, and turned it into a so-called day of national labour, with hundreds of thousands of workers drawn up on Germany's public squares under the swastika to listen to speeches by Hitler and the other Nazi leaders broadcast over loudspeakers. The next day stormtroopers all over Germany raided trade union and Social Democratic offices and premises, looted them, carried off the funds, and closed them down. Within a few weeks, mass arrests of union officials and Social Democratic leaders, many of whom were beaten up and tortured in the stormtroopers' concentration camps, had broken the spirit of the labour movement.

Other parties were now targeted in turn, with the liberal and splinter parties, reduced by electoral attrition to small groups on the fringes of politics, forced to dissolve themselves. A whispering campaign against Hitler's Nationalist coalition partners began, coupled with the harassment and arrest of Nationalist officials and deputies. Hitler's chief Nationalist ally, Alfred Hugenberg, was forced to resign from the cabinet, while the party's floor leader in the Reichstag was found dead in his office. Protests by Hugenberg met with a hysterical outburst from Hitler, in which he threatened a bloodbath if the Nationalists resisted any longer. By the end of June 1933 the Nationalists too had been dissolved.

The remaining big independent party, the Catholic Centre, was effectively caught by its Achilles' heel, namely its

allegiance to the Papacy in Rome. Nazi threats to sack Catholic civil servants and close down Catholic lay organisations combined with the Papacy's panic fear of Communism led to a deal, concluded in Rome, whereby the party agreed to dissolve itself in return for the finalisation of the Concordat already promised at the time of the Enabling Act, supposedly guaranteeing the integrity of the Church in Germany along with all its assets and organisations. Time would show that this was not worth the paper it was written on. In the meantime, however, the Centre Party followed the others into oblivion. By the middle of July 1933, Germany was a one-party state, a position ratified by a law formally banning all other parties apart from the Nazis.

Nazification

It was not just parties and trade unions that were abolished. The Nazi assault on existing institutions affected the whole of society. Every state government, every state parliament in Germany's federal political system, every town and district and local council, was ruthlessly purged. The Reichstag fire decree and the Enabling Act were used to dismiss supposed enemies of the state, meaning enemies of the Nazis. Every national voluntary association, and every local club, was brought under Nazi control, from industrial and agricultural pressure-groups to sports associations, football clubs, male voice choirs, women's organisations – in short, the whole fabric of associational life was Nazified. Rival, politically oriented clubs or societies were merged into a single Nazi body. Existing leaders of voluntary associations were either unceremoniously ousted, or knuckled under of their own accord, expelled politically leftish or liberal members, and declared their allegiance to the new state and its institutions. This whole process went on all over Germany from March to June 1933. By the end, virtually the only non-Nazi associations left were lay organisations belonging to the Churches.

While this was going on, the government passed a law that allowed it to purge the civil service, a vast organisation that included schoolteachers, university staff, judges, and many other professions that were not government-controlled in other countries. Social Democrats, liberals and not a few Catholics and conservatives were ousted here too. To save their jobs, at a time when unemployment had reached terrifying dimensions, 1.6 million people joined the Nazi Party between 30 January and 1 May 1933, when the Party leadership banned any more recruiting, while the number of brownshirt paramilitaries grew to over two million by the summer of 1933. The proportion of civil servants, judges and the like who were actually sacked for political reasons was very small. Only 300 out of 45,000 judges, state prosecutors and judicial officials in Prussia were dismissed or transferred to other duties on political grounds. Percentages in other areas were similar.

Anti-Semitism

The major reason for such dismissals was not political but racial. The civil service law passed by the Nazis allowed dismissal of Jewish civil servants, though Hindenburg had succeeded in getting a clause inserted protecting the jobs of Jewish war veterans and those appointed under the Kaiser, before 1914. In the judiciary and state legal service this made another 286 on top of the 300 dismissed for political reasons. Germany's Jewish minority was extremely small, about one per cent of the population; but Hitler had made it clear from the beginning of his political career in 1919 that he held them responsible for Germany's ills: they were, he said, a subversive, parasitical element who had to be got rid of. In fact most Jews were middle-class and liberal-to-conservative in their politics, insofar as they had any.

Already, in the autumn of 1932, there had been numerous incidents of stormtroopers beating up Jews, bombing Jewish property, and trashing Jewish shops. After 30 January 1933 these incidents multiplied rapidly. The day after the March election, stormtroopers rampaged along a fashionable shopping street in Berlin, hunting down Jews and beating them up. Synagogues were trashed, while all over Germany gangs of brownshirts burst into courthouses and dragged off Jewish judges and lawyers, beating them with rubber truncheons and telling them not to return. Jews who were amongst those arrested as Communists or Social Democrats were particularly harshly treated. Over 40 Jews had been murdered by stormtroopers by the end of June.

Such incidents were widely reported in the foreign press, and in retaliation Hitler, Goebbels and the Nazi leadership put into action a long-mulled-over plan to stage a nationwide boycott of Jewish shops and businesses. On 1 April 1933 stormtroopers stood menacingly outside such premises warning people not to enter them. Most non-Jewish Germans obeyed, but not with any enthusiasm. The biggest Jewish firms were untouched because they contributed too much to the economy. Realising it had failed to arouse popular enthusiasm, Goebbels called the action off after a few days. But the beatings, the violence and the boycott had their effect on the Jewish community in Germany, 37,000 of whom had emigrated by the end of the year. Victor Klemperer, a Jewish academic who was protected to some degree because his wife was not Jewish, noted in his diary that the atmosphere had become 'like the run-up to a pogrom in the depths of the Middle Ages or in innermost Tsarist Russia ... Actually I feel more ashamed than afraid. Ashamed of Germany.'

Artistic and Intellectual Life

The regime's purge of Jews, whom it defined not by their religious adherence but by racial criteria (descent going back many generations), had a particular effect in science, culture and the arts. Jewish conductors and musicians such as Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer were summarily dismissed or prevented from performing. The film industry and radio were rapidly purged of both Jews and political opponents of the Nazis: on 30 March 1933 one Social Democratic broadcaster, Jochen Klepper, whose wife was Jewish, was already complaining that 'what is left of the station is almost like a Nazi barracks: uniforms of the Party formations everywhere'. Two months later he too was sacked. Non-Nazi newspapers were closed down or brought under Nazi control, while the journalists' union and the newspaper publishers' association both placed themselves under Nazi leadership. Left-wing and liberal writers such as Bertolt Brecht, Thomas Mann, and many others, were stopped from publishing; many left the country.

Hitler reserved his particular enmity for modern artists like Paul Klee, Max Beckmann, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Vasily Kandinsky. Before 1914 he had been rejected from the Vienna Art Academy because his painstaking drawings of buildings had been thought talentless. Under the Weimar Republic, abstract and Expressionist artists had gained wealth and reputation with what Hitler thought were ugly and meaningless daubs. Now, while Hitler railed against modern art in his speeches, gallery and museum directors were sacked and replaced with men who not only removed modernist works from exhibition but even staged special shows of them to demonstrate how repulsive 'degenerate art' and 'cultural Bolshevism' were. The many modernist artists and composers, like Klee or Schoenberg, who held positions in state educational institutions, were all fired.

Altogether about 2,000 people active in the arts emigrated from Germany in 1933 and the following years. They

included virtually everyone with an international reputation; only a very few well known cultural figures, like the composer Richard Strauss or the poet Gottfried Benn, tried to play a role in the regime's cultural policies, but after an initial honeymoon they soon ran into difficulties. What was in store for those art and culture lovers who remained in Germany from 1933 was graphically demonstrated by a new play, dedicated to Hitler and opened in his presence on his birthday, 20 April 1933. A dramatisation of the revolt of German nationalists against the French occupation of the Ruhr ten years previously, it ended with the hero standing with his back to the audience as he was shot by a French firing squad, thus involving the whole audience in his fate. But it was widely remembered for a line spoken by one of the characters as he argued that culture and ideas should be replaced by blood and race: 'When I hear the word culture, I release the safety-catch of my Browning.' To many thoughtful, cultured Germans this seemed to sum up the Nazi attitude to culture, and it was soon attributed, quite without justification, to Hermann Göring, and simplified in the process to the catchier but oft-repeated statement: 'When I hear the word culture, I reach for my gun!'

Nazi anti-intellectualism was underlined still further by events in the universities. Here too Jewish professors in all fields were dismissed, and many, including Albert Einstein, Gustav Hertz, Erwin Schrödinger, Max Born and 20 past or future Nobel prize winners, left the country. By 1934, some 1,600 out of 5,000 university teachers had been forced out of their jobs, a third because they were Jewish, the rest because they were political opponents of the Nazis. 16 per cent of physics professors and assistants emigrated. When the Nobel prizewinning chemist Carl Bosch, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Germany's largest company, IG Farben, the German Dye Trust, went to see Hitler to complain about the damage this had done to Germany's scientific interests, Hitler interrupted him, shouted that Germany could get on for another hundred years without any physics or chemistry, then rang for his adjutant and told him that Bosch wanted to leave.

In the universities it was above all the students, helped by a small number of Nazi professors such as the philosopher Martin Heidegger, who drove the purges on, forcing Jewish and leftist professors out by violent demonstrations, and then, on 10 May 1933, organising demonstrations in the main squares of 19 university towns and cities in which huge numbers of books by Jewish and left-wing authors were piled up and set alight. The national students' organisation had supplied a common format to all these book-burnings, with slogans to intone as the works of one author after another were tossed into the flames: 'Against class struggle and materialism, for the national community and an idealistic outlook: Marx'; 'Against decadence and moral decay, for discipline and morality in family and state: Heinrich Mann' and so on. Freud's works were thrown in as well, as were the contents of the library of the sex reformer and gay rights activist Magnus Hirschfeld, as sex advice and abortion clinics were closed down all over Germany. The book-burning was not a Nazi idea: it was modelled on a similar event held by nationalist students in 1817 to mark the anniversary of Martin Luther's launching of the Reformation. The two events had little in common, since while the students of 1817 had thrown 'un-German' books like the Napoleonic Law Code onto the bonfire, they had also been demonstrating against police censorship and for the liberation of Poland. Still, as the flames rose to the skies again in 1933, there must have been more than a few who recalled the poet Heinrich Heine's comment on that earlier event, more than a century before: 'Where books are burned, in the end people will be burned too.'

Conclusion: Legality and Revolution

The Nazi seizure of power conformed neither to the spirit nor the letter of the law. Measures such as the Reichstag fire decree and the Enabling Act may have been in strict conformity with the Weimar Constitution, but they just as clearly violated its democratic and parliamentary spirit. In securing the passage of the Enabling Act, Hermann

Göring, as President of the Reichstag, had acted illegally in barring the recently elected Communist deputies from attending and then reducing by their number the quorum from which the two-thirds vote had to be counted. More seriously, the Social Democrats had managed earlier in the year to secure a ruling from the State Court that the deposition of the Prussian government by Papen the previous year had been largely illegal, so that Göring was not in fact entitled to carry out any government office in Prussia, and certainly not to enrol the stormtroopers as auxiliary police. In any case, putting a police armband on a stormtrooper did not make the beatings and murders they committed legal, a fact recognised by the courts and the prosecutors, who had no fewer than 7,000 prosecutions of stormtroopers in progress when the cabinet issued an amnesty quashing them all at the end of March 1933.

The Nazi seizure of power depended crucially on mass violence and intimidation for its success. Without the concentration camps, there would have been no one-party state.

Did this, then, make it a revolution? The Nazis certainly referred to the 'national socialist revolution', but in doing so they meant in the first place simply the elimination of political opposition; there was no thought of carrying out a social revolution along the lines of France in 1789 or Russia in 1917. They also emphasised continuities with the past, and portrayed their regime as picking up the thread of German history from Frederick the Great and Bismarck once more, whereas the French and Russian revolutionaries rejected the past in its entirety. In a number of speeches in 1933-34 Hitler stressed the importance of using what was good in the German past, while rejecting what he saw as bad.

What the Nazis did try to achieve was a cultural revolution, in which alien cultural influences – notably the Jews but also modernist culture more generally – were eliminated and the German spirit reborn. Germans did not just have to acquiesce in the Third Reich, they had to support it with all their heart and soul, and the creation of the Propaganda Ministry under Joseph Goebbels, which soon acquired control over the whole sphere of culture and the arts, was the main means by which they sought to achieve this end.

Issues to Debate

- Why did the Left put up such inadequate opposition to Hitler in 1933?
- How virulent was Anti-Semitism in Germany in this year?
- What sort of a revolution had the Nazis achieved?

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