

## 2.2 Causes of World War II: the Nazis' rise to power

The main cause of World War II was aggression by the Nazi regime that controlled Germany from 1933 to 1945. This fascist party headed by Adolf Hitler led Germany into war in 1939. But how did it gain power? In **chapter 1** you learned about the rise of fascist movements. Three factors in particular helped the rise of the Nazis: resentment against the Treaty of Versailles; the myth that Germany had been betrayed; and the Great Depression.

### The Treaty of Versailles and the *Dolchstoßlegende*

Many Germans bitterly resented the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles and its humiliating clause blaming Germany for the war. German **right-wingers** reacted with the *Dolchstoßlegende*, the 'stab in the back' myth. It held that Germany had not been defeated but was betrayed by the 'November criminals', the democratic socialists who created the republic, signed the armistice and accepted the hated treaty. This myth undermined the **Weimar Republic** from the beginning.

### The impact of the 1930s Depression

In the early 1920s Germany suffered **hyperinflation**, which wiped out the value of its currency. However, from 1924 to 1929 the government managed to improve Germany's finances and international relations. Under the 1924 Dawes Plan, reparations payments were spread over a longer period and Germany was given loans to help rebuild its economy. Under the Locarno Treaty of 1925, Germany accepted its western borders set by the Treaty of Versailles, and in 1926 Germany was admitted to the League of Nations. However, as the Great Depression spread through industrialised countries from 1929, Germany was most severely affected. As foreign loans dried up, investment fell and by 1932 six million Germans were unemployed.

### The fall of democratic government

When the Depression hit, Germany had a coalition government headed by the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The SPD wanted to raise taxes on the rich to maintain payments to the unemployed. The non-socialist parties opposed this, so the coalition split and the government collapsed. President Hindenburg used the crisis to appoint an authoritarian Centre Party government

**Source 1** During the hyperinflation of the early 1920s, German *Deutschmarks* lost so much of their value that, as shown here, they were used as waste paper, insulation and fuel for heating. Middle-class people saw their savings wiped out.



that lacked support in the **Reichstag**. When elections were held in September 1930, moderate parties lost ground. The Communist Party increased its percentage of votes from 10.6 to 13.1, but the Nazi Party climbed from just 2.6 to 18.3 per cent.

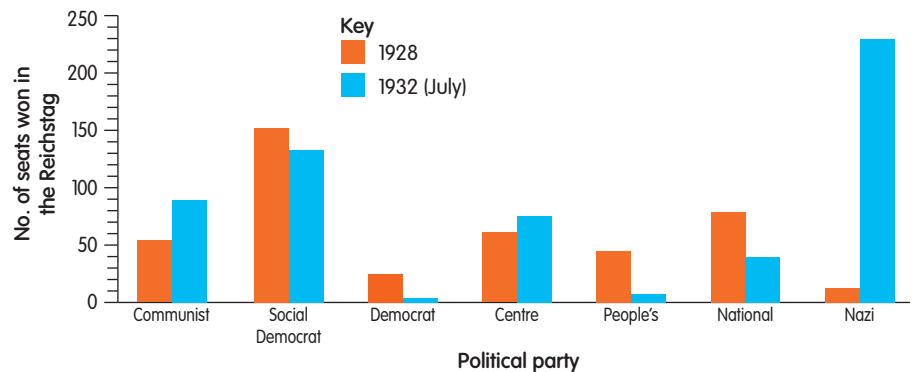
Hindenburg still refused to appoint a government that had majority support, so new elections were scheduled for 27 July 1932. Before the elections the Nazis' **paramilitary** wing, the *Sturmabteilung* (known as the SA), launched a wave of street violence against the **left-wing** parties. In the elections the Nazis gained 37.3 per cent of the vote to become the largest party in the Reichstag. Following a Reichstag vote of no confidence in the government, further elections were held in November. Although the Nazi vote fell by 4 per cent, on 30 January 1933 Hindenburg invited Hitler to become Chancellor (prime minister) of a right-wing coalition government. In less than two months Germany would be transformed into a Nazi dictatorship.

## Did you know?



In September 1918 General Ludendorff, the virtual military dictator of Germany, persuaded the Kaiser to transfer power to a civilian government and demand that it seek an armistice. Germany's military leaders then shifted the blame for the nation's defeat and humiliation from the military and the old order to the new democratic government.

Source 2 Numbers of seats won by parties in the Reichstag in 1928 and 1932



## The rise of the Nazis

How did the Nazis get so far? In 1921 Hitler had become their first president, and the SA was created to terrorise socialists and communists. By 1923 the party had support from several army officers. The basic ideas of Nazi ideology were:

- only the strong survive
- the hated communism is regarded as a Jewish ideology
- the Germanic master race must defeat its racial enemies, especially the Jews
- Germany must gain *Lebensraum* (living room) for its expanding population by taking land from non-Aryan races
- the *Führerprinzip* (leader principle) dictates that all opposition must be crushed and there must be total obedience to the leader.

After a failed attempt to seize power in 1923, Hitler focused on building support. The Hitler Youth was founded in 1926 to indoctrinate young Germans. The Nazis gained supporters through public spectacles such as the Nuremberg rallies, through the support of influential individuals such as Alfred Hugenberg, who controlled 700 newspapers, and through propaganda blaming Germany's problems on communists and Jews. Joseph Goebbels was appointed to head the Nazi propaganda unit in 1929. He organised the party's election campaigns and won over many middle-class voters, who turned from other conservative parties to the Nazis out of fear of communism.

## Consolidating power

A month after Hitler became Chancellor, the Reichstag was severely damaged by fire and the Nazis stirred up fears of a communist uprising. Hitler persuaded Hindenburg to issue a Decree for the Protection of People and State. This allowed for imprisonment without trial and abolition of freedom of the press, speech and assembly. During the weeks preceding the March 1933 elections, the Nazis used the decree to restrict campaigning by other parties. Despite their intimidation of voters, the Nazis won only

43.9 per cent of the vote, so they formed a coalition with the small Nationalist Party and barred the Communists from taking the seats they had won.

The Enabling Act of 23 March 1933 gave Hitler dictatorial powers and gave his government the power to make laws and change the Constitution as it wished. In the Reichstag, only the SPD had the courage to vote against the Act.

Source 3 The text on this Nazi poster translates as 'In the deepest need Hindenburg chose Adolf Hitler for Reich Chancellor. You too should vote for List 1.'



## Nazification of Germany

By 1934 the Nazis controlled German social, political, economic and cultural life.

- Nazi courts were established to try 'political criminals'.
- Anti-Nazis and Jews were forced out of jobs in the civil service.
- Trade unions were abolished and the German Labour Front was established to control workers.
- 'Un-German' books were publicly burned.
- Like the Communist Party, the SPD was banned. Other parties dissolved themselves.

- German communists, socialists and other anti-Nazis were sent to **concentration camps**.
- Education was made a tool of Nazi propaganda.
- The Nazis organised attacks against Jews and Jewish property and a boycott of Jewish businesses, and banned Jews from the civil service and professions.
- Under the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, Jews lost their German citizenship and political rights. Marriage and sexual relations between Jews and Aryans were banned.

To prepare for war, Hitler needed the support of the army leaders so he eliminated Ernst Röhm and other SA

**Source 4** A modern artist's impression of a scene at a Nazi rally

**A** Hitler appealed to almost all members of society. He promised to take care of the workers and farmers, and to return the middle class to the good fortune and peace they remembered from childhood.

**B** Hitler saw himself as a symbol of Germany. Before every speech, he studied pictures of himself to perfect his movements and signals. Before speaking, he paused for a long time, forcing the crowd to wait, hushed, for him to begin. Then he spoke passionately, often spitting with the effort.

**C** By the mid 1930s, six out of every ten young German people had joined the Hitler Youth. They could join when they were ten years old, with separate organisations for boys and girls. As Hitler Youth members, they were brainwashed with Nazi Party ideology, particularly anti-Semitism (anti-Jewish views). By 1936 there were about four million members.





leaders, who wanted the regular army to be amalgamated with the SA under SA leadership. On the 'Night of the Long Knives', 30 June 1934, Hitler used the other Nazi paramilitary force, the SS, to murder around 180 leading SA members and more than 200 other political opponents. To justify this, Hitler claimed that the SA was planning an uprising. The murders created a close relationship between the Nazi regime and the army, and led to the dominance of the SS in the Nazi state.

When Hindenburg died on 2 August 1934, Hitler assumed total power as *Führer* (absolute ruler) of Germany. He became commander-in-chief and all soldiers were required to take a personal oath of loyalty to him.



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**D** Hitler was the first world leader to make political use of film-makers. Films demonstrated to his supporters that he was moving with the times, but they did something more important: if the Third Reich was to last for 1000 years, as he promised, these films would be kept for future generations.

## Activities

### CHRONOLOGY, TERMS AND CONCEPTS

- 1 Create a timeline of events from 1919 to 1934 that contributed to Germany's becoming a Nazi dictatorship.
- 2 Explain the meaning of the following terms and concepts:
  - a Weimar Republic
  - b paramilitary
  - c Reichstag
  - d Führer
  - e concentration camp.

### EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION

- 3 How did each of the following factors help the rise of the Nazis?
  - a Resentment against the conditions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles
  - b The myth of the 'stab in the back'
  - c The Great Depression.
- 4 What role did President Hindenburg play in Hitler's rise to power?
- 5 Why was Hitler willing to murder members of his own party?
- 6 What measures did the Nazis adopt to crush their opponents between 1933 and 1934?

### ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES

- 7 Look closely at **Source 1**. Why might this situation have encouraged middle-class people to turn to extremist parties?
- 8 Use **Source 2** to work out which parties gained and which lost votes between 1928 and 1932. How would you explain these changes in voting?
- 9 Look at **Source 3**. For which election would this poster have been produced, and how does it portray Hitler?
- 10 Study **Source 4** and explain what use the Nazis made of public rallies, film and slogans.

### HISTORICAL QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH

- 11 Use the internet and your library to find out what happened on *Kristallnacht* (the 'Night of Broken Glass'), 7 November 1938.

**Aryan** term used by the Nazis to describe 'pure-blooded' Germanic peoples

**concentration camps** prison camps where people were beaten, tortured, starved and used as slave labour

**hyperinflation** such an extreme rise in prices that a currency loses any real value

**left wing** of parties, ideologies and individuals, such as communists and socialists, that want greater political equality

**paramilitary** armed forces outside the official military

**Reichstag** the German Parliament

**right wing** of parties, ideologies and individuals whose political beliefs range from conservative to fascist

**Weimar Republic** the democratic system of government in Germany from 1919 to early 1933, so called because its constitution was written in the city of Weimar