

CHAPTER 2:

THE CONSOLIDATION OF NAZI RULE IN GERMANY

The Reichstag Fire

(27 February 1933)

- On 27 *February* 1933, the Reichstag building was burnt down by a lone and mentally unstable communist.
- Hitler immediately declared that the fire was the beginning of a communist uprising. He persuaded Hindenburg to pass the Decree for the Protection of People and State, giving Hitler sweeping emergency powers.
- The SA and SS (Police) arrested 4000 communists
- Opposition party meetings, newspapers and radio broadcasts were also banned.
 - *This made it difficult for the opposition parties to campaign.*
- In the elections of 5 March, the Nazis gained 288 seats. They had 52% of the seats.

The Enabling Act

(24 March 1933)

- Hitler wanted to introduce a new measure called the Enabling Act, which would allow him to make and pass laws without consulting the Reichstag.
- Only the SPD voted against Hitler during the elections. (Since the communists were in prison)
- *The Enabling Act was passed on 24 March.*

Gleichschaltung

(April-July 1933)

- Hitler continued to strengthen his power in a process called *Gleichschaltung*, or Coordination.
- This involved bringing all aspects of the state under Nazi control.
- *April 1933*: Hitler passed a law which banned Jews from the civil service.
- *May 1933*: Trade unions were banned, and all local councils had to have a Nazi majority.
- By *July*, Hitler passed a law banning all other political parties, resulting in Germany being a one-party state.

The Night of the Long Knives

(29-30 June 1934)

- By the middle of 1934, Hitler was starting to see the SA (particularly its leader, Ernst Rohm) as a threat.
- The members of the SA were fiercely loyal to Rohm and supported his calls to tax elite groups, but Hitler had been put into power by said elite groups.
- The army commanders also became suspicious of the SA and were unsettled by Rohm's talk of making the SA into a second German army.
- On *the weekend of 29-30 June 1934*, squads of SS men arrested Rohm and other leading figures in the SA. Hitler accused Rohm of plotting to overthrow and murder him. Rohm and possibly as many as 400 others were executed. This purge came to be infamously known as the Night of the Long Knives.
- Although the SA was not disbanded afterwards, it lost much of its prestige and influence. Many of its members were absorbed into the army and the SS.
- The SA was not the sole target of the purge. Hitler also targeted his old rivals. For example, von Papen was placed under house arrest. Hitler offered him the post of ambassador to Austria. Von Papen accepted the offer.

The Army and the Oath of Allegiance

(2 August 1934)

- Soon after the Night of the Long Knives, Hindenburg died. The only figure who could rival Hitler's authority was now gone.
- Hitler took over as Fuehrer (Supreme Leader) of Germany.
- On *2 August 1934*, the entire army swore an oath of personal loyalty to Hitler. The army agreed to stay out of politics and to serve him. In return, Hitler spent vast sums on rearmament, brought back conscription and made plans to make Germany a great military power again.

LIFE UNDER NAZI RULE

NAZI ECONOMIC POLICIES

- Hitler had promised the German people he would get them back to Work and restore the economy. The situation was terrible with around five million unemployed in 1933, but Hitler was fortunate that the worst of the Depression was already over by then. Even so, there was no doubt that the Nazis acted with energy and commitment to solve some of the main problems.
- Germany's finances were organised to fund a huge programme of work creation.
 - The Reich Labour Service sent men on public works projects and conservation programmes, in particular to build a network of highways or autobahns. Railways were extended or built from scratch.
 - There were major house-building programmes and new public building projects such as the Reich Chancellery in Berlin.
- Hitler appointed Hjalmar Schacht first as President of the Reichsbank in March 1933, then in August 1934 as Economics Minister. By using state regulations such as deficit financing borrowing money from the public through loan bonds with the promise of paying them back in the future he played a critical role in the economic recovery and in stabilising German finances to fund grand programmes.
- These measures were effective in reducing unemployment and were welcomed by most Germans.

Rearmament and the Move to a War Economy

One of Hitler's most cherished plans was rearmament.

- In 1935, he reintroduced conscription for the German army.
 - In 1936, he announced a Four-Year Plan under the control of Goering. The plan aimed to get the German economy ready for war within four years. Priority had to be given to rearmament and Germany had to be made as self-sufficient as possible in food and industrial production, a policy known as autarky. Goering proceeded to manage the economy through a series of regulations that controlled most aspects of labour, prices and raw materials - setting new targets that the private industries had to match.
 - The conscription reduced unemployment.
 - The need for weapons equipment and uniforms created jobs in the coal mines, steel mills and textile mills.
 - Engineers and designers gained new opportunities, particularly when Hitler decreed that Germany would have a world-class air force (the Luftwaffe).
 - Besides bringing about economic recovery, these measures boosted Hitler's popularity because they renewed national pride. Germans began to feel that their country was finally emerging from the humiliation of WWI and the Treaty of Versailles. Germany was now able to put itself on an equal footing with the other great powers.
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Living Standards in Nazi Germany

- Big companies benefitted the most from Nazi rule. As these companies flourished, so did their managers. Their incomes rose much faster than those of their workers.
- However, life in Nazi Germany was not always as prosperous and comfortable as experienced by the big businesses or as the propaganda machine liked to portray. For groups such as the farmers and middle classes, it was a mixed picture.

Working Conditions in Germany

- Propaganda praised the workers and tried to associate them with Hitler (often called Germany's "First Worker"). Hitler fulfilled his promise to lower unemployment, which helped to ensure Nazi popularity among industrial workers.
 - He also tried to win their loyalty with various initiatives. Schemes such as Strength Through Joy (Kraft durch Freude or KdF) gave them cheap theatre and cinema tickets, organised courses, trips and sports events, and even offered discounted cruises on luxury liners.
 - By 1939, over 50 million Germans had been on a KdF holiday. Another important scheme was the Beauty of Labour (Schönheit der Arbeit) movement. This improved working conditions in factories.
- It introduced features not seen in many workplaces before, Such as washing facilities and low-cost canteens.
- A state scheme was introduced to help workers buy the Volkswagen Beetle, the "people's car" It became a symbol of the prosperous new Germany even though no worker ever received one because the war halted all car production in 1939.

What was the cost of these advances?

- The workers lost their main political party, the SPD, They lost their trade unions and for many workers this remained a source of bitter resentment.
- All workers had to join the DAF run by Robert Ley (see page 55). The DAF kept strict control of the workers. They could not strike for better pay and conditions, In some areas, they were prevented from moving to better-paid jobs.
- Wages remained comparatively low, although prices of goods were also strictly controlled. By the late 1930s, many workers were grumbling that their standard of living was still lower than it had been before the Depression.

SOCIAL POLICIES

Role of Women in Nazi Germany

- The ideal German Aryan family expected women to conform to their traditional role as care-givers.
- Under Nazi rule, women were excluded from politics and academics. Many young German girls instead received vigorous training in domestic tasks.
- Employment opportunities for women were limited and discrimination against women was encouraged.

Education and the Hitler Youth

- Education
 - The Nazis ensured all teachers had to attend training courses stressing Nazi ideology.
 - The curriculum was changed to reflect a greater emphasis on Nazi values. This included infusing Nazi ideas into subjects such as history and biology, as well as the production of Nazi-approved textbooks.
- The Hitler Youth
 - The Hitler Youth was a paramilitary organisation of the Nazi Party to groom German youths to be future leaders in Nazi organisations.
 - By 1933, it had 2.3 million members.
 - It organised a variety of activities, such as camps, sports, and physical training, and this was backed up by indoctrination in anti-Semitism and Nazi ideology.

The Persecution of Minorities

- The Nazis wanted to use eugenics to improve the Aryan race through a euthanasia and sterilisation programme. They persecuted members of other races and many minority groups such as Roma, homosexuals and mentally ill people, and any group that they thought challenged Nazi ideals.
- Between 1934-1945, over 300,000 men and women were forcefully sterilised.
- A so called "euthanasia programme" of the disabled and mentally ill, even if they were of the Aryan race, started in 1939. At least 5,000 disabled babies and children were killed between 1939 and 1945 either by injection or by starvation. Between 1939 and 1941, 72,000 mentally ill patients were gassed before a public outcry in Germany ended the extermination.
- By contrast, there was little protest about the treatment of the Roma. Five out of Six Roma living in Germany in 1939 were killed by the Nazis. Similarly, there was little to no complaint about the treatment of homosexuals and the so-called asocials - alcoholics, the homeless, prostitutes, habitual criminals and beggars - who were rounded up off the streets and sent to concentration camps.

Hitler and the Jews

- Hitler became obsessed with the fact that Jewish people ran many of the most successful businesses, particularly the large department stores.
- He also blamed Jewish businessmen and bankers for Germany's defeat in WW1. He thought he had forced the surrender of the German army.
- As soon as Hitler took power in 1933, he began to mobilise the full powers of the state against the Jews.
 - They were banned from the civil service and a variety of public services such as broadcasting and teaching. At the same time, the SA and later the SS organised boycotts of Jewish shops and businesses, which were marked with the Star of David.
- The Nuremberg Laws
 - In 1935, the Nuremberg Laws took away German citizenship from the Jews and deprived them of all civil and political rights. Many Jewish businesses had to close down.
- Kristallnacht
 - SS troopers smashed up Jewish shops and workplaces with pickaxes and hammers, resulting in the murder of 91 Jews. Synagogues were also burned.
- The Final Solution
 - Many Jews were sent to concentration camps to work as slave labour, forced to live in ghettos and then systematically killed.

CONTROL AND FEAR

Having taken control of Germany, Hitler and the Nazis quickly set about ensuring that they maintained total control over the German population. They were helped by the remarkable and unexpected speed and success of the Gleichschaltung process. At the same time, there was powerful and terrifying machinery to deal with any Germans who tried to resist.

The SS

- The SS, led by Heinrich Himmler, was very highly trained and totally loyal to Hitler. It was primarily responsible for destroying opposition to Nazism and carrying out the racial policies of the Nazis. The SS had various sub-divisions which ensured Nazi control, including the Sicherheitsdienst (SD) which monitored political opponents and stopped spies who tried to infiltrate the Nazi Party. Another sub-division was the Secret State Police (Geheime Staatspolizei or Gestapo). The Gestapo could arrest citizens and send them to concentration camps without trial or even explanation. By 1939, it had sent around 160,000 people to concentration camps. The Gestapo was perhaps the organisation most feared by ordinary citizens.

Concentration Camps

- Almost as soon as Hitler took power, concentration camps were set up to "correct" opponents of the regime. Prisoners were forced to do hard labour and given limited food. They suffered harsh discipline, beatings and random executions. Jews, socialists, communists, trade unionists, churchmen and anyone else brave enough to criticise the Nazis ended up in these camps. So did many Germans who were unfortunate enough to not fit in. One famous example was revealed in a TV documentary: a German woman admitted that she in the 1990s informed on her neighbour because the neighbour was "very artistic". Historians estimate that around 1.3 million Germans, half a million European Roma and countless political prisoners, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals as well as Russian and Polish prisoners of war spent at least some time in concentration camps between 1933 and 1939. The concentration camps were not the same as the death camps created during WWII. Even so, by the late 1930s, deaths in the camps were increasingly common and very few people came out alive.

The Legal System: Police, Judges and Courts

- Judges had to belong to the Nazi-approved National Socialist League for the Maintenance of the Law, or else they could not practise. This soon created a form of self-imposed control - judges knew what they were expected to do and did it. Hitler abolished trial by jury, so all cases were decided by judges. This meant that opponents of Nazism rarely received a fair trial.
- From 1933 to 1936, though the police forces were controlled by the regional governments in Germany, the Nazis made sure these forces were headed by a high-ranking Nazi. One reason why the Nazis were so successful in 1933 and 1934 was that Goering had control of the Berlin police force. In 1936, Hitler issued a decree making Himmler the Chief of Police of Germany. This effectively made the normal police forces part of the SS. Thus, the police became increasingly involved in political activities as well as law and order.

PROPAGANDA AND CENSORSHIP

Besides using terror to control the people, the Nazis had a very effective propaganda machine. It was headed by Joseph Goebbels, the Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. Goebbels used propaganda to encourage German nationalistic sentiments. Posters and portraits of Hitler and the Nazi Party were spread throughout Germany to brainwash the German people. At the same time, he also stirred up anti-communist and racist feelings, particularly anti-Semitism, as shown in the early propaganda cartoons.

To Impress Germans and Win Them Over

- The Nazis put huge investment into impressing Germans to win them over.
 - Every year, the Nazis held spectacular rallies, marches and meetings in the Bavarian city of Nuremberg. The Nazis invested heavily in the film industry as well.
 - In 1936, the Olympics were held in Berlin. Goebbels used it as a showcase for Nazi rule.

To Limit German Access to Information and Ideas

- Goebbels kept very strict control over what Germans were allowed to read hear and watch. No books, paintings or any other art form could be produced without Nazi approval. There was also heavy censorship and newspapers were not allowed to print anti-Nazi ideas. All films had to carry a pro- Nazi message. The newsreels shown along with films all proclaimed Nazi achievements. The government made cheap radios available so all Germans could buy one and listen to Nazi propaganda when aired. There were harsh penalties for anyone who listened to unauthorised stations. All of these restrictions were enforced strictly. Gestapo agents and informers monitored anyone thought to be producing or consuming banned works. The police, SD and Gestapo would arrest any offenders and take them to concentration camps.

To Remind Germans of the Power of the State

- Local Nazi parties held regular marches at least once a week, often handing out leaflets. Hitler Youth groups also marched regularly. These activities created the impression that the state was everywhere, even if this might not have been the case (see Source 2.15).

RESISTANCE AND OPPOSITION

Political Opposition

- Some socialists and communists were still alive, sending reports back to their leaders in exile or trying to encourage workers to resist by striking or sabotaging equipment.
- Any opponents who were caught were punished very harshly.

Military Resistance

- Aristocratic officers and conservatives opposed the Nazi regime.
- There was a failed assassination attempt in July 1944 called the Bomb Plot.
- Many of these officers were later arrested, tried and executed.

Refusal to Conform

- There were some people or groups who refused to accept and conform to Nazi ideals.
 - Criticism by Churches
 - The Nazis had a difficult and tense relationship with the churches. They disliked the churches but could not close them down.
 - Many members of the clergy criticised the Nazis in their sermons and eventually, 400 Catholic priests ended up in the clergy block of the Dachau concentration camp.
 - Some Protestant ministers also resisted and many of them ended up in concentration camps.
 - Anti-Nazi Youth Groups
 - The Nazis tried to control and win over the young through organisations such as the Hitler youth.
 - However, there were also some youth groups such as the White Rose and Edelweiss Pirates which rejected the Nazis.
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