

Chapter 14

Germany, 1918–45: the Weimar Republic and Hitler

SUMMARY OF EVENTS

As Germany moved towards defeat in 1918, public opinion turned against the government, and in October, the Kaiser, in a desperate bid to hang on to power, appointed Prince Max of Baden as Chancellor. He was known to be in favour of a more democratic form of government in which parliament had more power. But it was too late: in November revolution broke out, the Kaiser escaped to Holland and abdicated, and Prince Max resigned. Friedrich Ebert, leader of the left-wing Social Democrat Party (SPD), became head of the government. In January 1919 a general election was held, the first completely democratic one ever to take place in Germany. The Social Democrats emerged as the largest single party and Ebert became the first president of the republic. They had some Marxist ideas but believed that the way to achieve socialism was through parliamentary democracy.

The new government was by no means popular with all Germans: even before the elections the communists had attempted to seize power in *the Spartacist Rising (January 1919)*. In 1920, right-wing enemies of the republic occupied Berlin (the *Kapp Putsch*). The government managed to survive these threats and several later ones, including *Hitler's Munich Beer-Hall Putsch (1923)*.

By the end of 1919 a new constitution had been agreed by the National Assembly (parliament), which was meeting in Weimar because Berlin was still torn by political unrest. This Weimar constitution (sometimes called the most perfect democratic constitution of modern times, at least on paper) gave its name to *the Weimar Republic*, and lasted until 1933, when it was destroyed by Hitler. It passed through three phases:

- 1 *1919 to the end of 1923* A period of instability and crisis during which the republic was struggling to survive.
- 2 *From the end of 1923 to the end of 1929* A period of stability in which Gustav Stresemann was the leading politician. Thanks to *the Dawes Plan of 1924*, by which the USA provided huge loans, Germany seemed to be recovering from her defeat and was enjoying an industrial boom.
- 3 *October 1929 to January 1933* Instability again; the world economic crisis, beginning with the Wall Street Crash in October 1929, soon had disastrous effects on Germany, producing six and a half million unemployed. The government was unable to cope with the situation and by the end of 1932 the Weimar Republic seemed on the verge of collapse.

Meanwhile Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazis – NSDAP) had been carrying out a great propaganda campaign blaming the government for all the ills of Germany, and setting out Nazi solutions to the problems. In January 1933, President Hindenburg appointed Hitler as Chancellor, and soon afterwards Hitler saw to it that democracy ceased to exist; the Weimar Republic was at an end, and from then until

April 1945, Hitler was the dictator of Germany. Only defeat in the Second World War and the death of Hitler (30 April 1945) freed the German people from the Nazi tyranny.

14.1 WHY DID THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC FAIL?

(a) It began with serious disadvantages

- 1 *It had accepted the humiliating and unpopular Versailles Treaty* (see Section 2.8), with its arms limitations, reparations and war-guilt clause, and was therefore always associated with defeat and dishonour. German nationalists could never forgive it for that.
- 2 *There was a traditional lack of respect for democratic government* and a great admiration for the army and the 'officer class' as the rightful leaders of Germany. In 1919 the view was widespread that the army had not been defeated: it had been betrayed – 'stabbed in the back' – by the democrats, who had needlessly agreed to the Versailles Treaty. What most Germans did not realize was that it was General Ludendorff who had asked for an armistice while the Kaiser was still in power (see Section 2.6(b)). However, the 'stab in the back' legend was eagerly fostered by all enemies of the republic.
- 3 *The parliamentary system introduced in the new Weimar constitution had weaknesses*, the most serious of which was that it was based on a system of proportional representation, so that all political groups would be fairly represented. Unfortunately there were so many different groups that no party could ever win an overall majority. For example, in 1928 the *Reichstag* (lower house of parliament) contained at least eight groups, of which the largest were the Social Democrats with 153 seats, the German National Party (DNVP) with 73, and the Catholic Centre Party (Zentrum) with 62. The German Communist Party (KPD) had 54 seats, while the German People's party (DVP – Stresemann's liberal party) had 45. The smallest groups were the Bavarian People's Party with 16, and the National Socialists, who only had 12 seats. A succession of coalition governments was inevitable, with the Social Democrats having to rely on co-operation from left-wing liberals and the Catholic Centre. No party was able to carry out its programme.
- 4 *The political parties had very little experience of how to operate a democratic parliamentary system*, because before 1919 the Reichstag had not controlled policy; the Chancellor had the final authority and was the one who really ruled the country. Under the Weimar constitution it was the other way round – the Chancellor was responsible to the Reichstag, which had the final say. However, the Reichstag usually failed to give a clear lead because the parties had not learned the art of compromise. The communists and nationalists did not believe in democracy anyway, and refused to support the Social Democrats. The communist refusal to work with the SPD meant that no strong government of the left was possible. Disagreements became so bitter that some of the parties organized their own private armies, for self-defence to begin with, but this increased the threat of civil war. The combination of these weaknesses led to more outbreaks of violence and attempts to overthrow the republic.

(b) Outbreaks of violence

1 *The Spartacist Rising*

In January 1919 the communists tried to seize power in what became known as *the Spartacist Rising* (Spartacus was a Roman who led a revolt of slaves in 71 BC). Inspired

by the recent success of the Russian Revolution, and led by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, they occupied almost every major city in Germany. In Berlin, President Ebert found himself besieged in the Chancellery. The government managed to defeat the communists only because it accepted the help of the *Freikorps*. These were independent volunteer regiments raised by anti-communist ex-army officers. It was a sign of the government's weakness that it had to depend on private forces, which it did not itself control. The two communist leaders did not receive a fair trial – they were simply clubbed to death by *Freikorps* members.

2 *The Kapp Putsch (March 1920)*

This was an attempt by right-wing groups to seize power. It was sparked off when the government tried to disband the *Freikorps* private armies. They refused to disband and declared Dr Wolfgang Kapp as Chancellor. Berlin was occupied by a *Freikorps* regiment and the cabinet fled to Dresden. The German army (*Reichswehr*) took no action against the *Putsch* (coup, or rising) because the generals were in sympathy with the political right. In the end the workers of Berlin came to the aid of the Social Democrat government by calling a general strike, which paralysed the capital. Kapp resigned and the government regained control. However, it was so weak that nobody was punished except Kapp, who was imprisoned, and it took two months to get the *Freikorps* disbanded. Even then the ex-members remained hostile to the republic and many later joined Hitler's private armies.

3 *A series of political assassinations took place*

These were mainly carried out by ex-*Freikorps* members. Victims included Walter Rathenau (the Jewish Foreign Minister) and Gustav Erzberger (leader of the armistice delegation). When the government sought strong measures against such acts of terrorism, there was great opposition from the right-wing parties, who sympathized with the criminals. Whereas the communist leaders had been brutally murdered, the courts let right-wing offenders off lightly and the government was unable to intervene. In fact, throughout Germany, the legal and teaching professions, the civil service and the *Reichswehr* tended to be anti-Weimar, which was a crippling handicap for the republic.

4 *Hitler's Beer-Hall Putsch*

Another threat to the government occurred in November 1923 in Bavaria, at a time when there was much public annoyance at the French occupation of the Ruhr (see Section 4.2(c)) and the disastrous fall in the value of the mark (see below). Hitler, helped by General Ludendorff, aimed to take control of the Bavarian state government in Munich, and then lead a national revolution to overthrow the government in Berlin. However, the police easily broke up Hitler's march, and the 'Beer-Hall *Putsch*' (so-called because the march set out from the Munich beer hall in which Hitler had announced his 'national revolution' the previous evening) soon fizzled out. Hitler was sentenced to five years' imprisonment but served only nine months (because the Bavarian authorities had some sympathy with his aims).

5 *Private armies expand*

The violence died down during the years 1924 to 1929 as the republic became more stable, but when unemployment grew in the early 1930s, *the private armies expanded* and regular street fights occurred, usually between Nazis and communists. All parties had their meetings broken up by rival armies and the police seemed powerless to prevent it happening.

All this showed that the government was incapable of keeping law and order, and respect for it dwindled. An increasing number of people began to favour a return to strong, authoritarian government, which would maintain strict public order.

(c) Economic problems

Probably the crucial cause of the failure of the republic was the economic problems which plagued it constantly and which it proved incapable of solving permanently.

- 1 *In 1919 Germany was close to bankruptcy* because of the enormous expense of the war, which had lasted much longer than most people expected.
- 2 *Attempts to pay reparations instalments made matters worse.* In August 1921, after paying the £50 million due, Germany requested permission to suspend payments until her economy recovered. France refused, and in 1922 the Germans claimed they were unable to make the full annual payment.
- 3 *In January 1923 French troops occupied the Ruhr* (an important German industrial area) in an attempt to seize goods from factories and mines. The German government ordered the workers to follow a policy of passive resistance, and German industry in the Ruhr was paralysed. The French had failed in their aim, but the effect on the German economy was catastrophic – galloping inflation and the collapse of the mark. The rate of exchange at the end of the war was 20 marks to the dollar, but even before the Ruhr occupation, reparations difficulties had caused the mark to fall in value. Table 14.1 shows the disastrous decline in the mark.

By November 1923 the value of the mark was falling so rapidly that a worker paid in mark notes had to spend them immediately: if he waited until the following day, his notes would be worthless (see Illus. 14.1). It was only when the new Chancellor, Gustav Stresemann, introduced a new currency known as the *Rentenmark*, in 1924, that the financial situation finally stabilized.

This financial disaster had profound effects on German society: the working classes were badly hit – wages failed to keep pace with inflation and trade union funds were wiped out. Worst affected were the middle classes and small capitalists, who lost their savings; many began to look towards the Nazis for improvement. On the other hand, landowners and industrialists came out of the crisis well, because they still owned their material wealth – rich farming land, mines and factories. This strengthened the control of big business over the German economy. Some historians have even suggested that the inflation was deliberately engineered by wealthy industrialists with this aim in mind. The accusation is impossible to prove one way or the other, though the currency and the economy did recover remarkably quickly.

The economic situation improved dramatically in the years after 1924, largely thanks to *the Dawes Plan* of that year (so called after the American General Dawes, who chaired the conference), which provided an immediate loan from the USA equivalent to £40

Table 14.1 **The collapse of the German mark, 1918–23**

	<i>Date</i>	<i>Marks required in exchange for £1</i>
November	1918	20
February	1922	1 000
June	1922	1 500
December	1922	50 000
February	1923	100 000
November	1923	21 000 000 000



Illustration 14.1 **Hyperinflation in Germany: boys making kites out of worthless banknotes in the early 1920s**

million, relaxed the fixed reparations payments and in effect allowed the Germans to pay what they could afford. French troops withdrew from the Ruhr. The currency was stabilized, there was a boom in such industries as iron, steel, coal, chemicals and electricals, and wealthy landowners and industrialists were happy to tolerate the republic, since they were doing well out of it. Germany was even able to pay her reparations instalments under the Dawes Plan. During these relatively prosperous years, *Gustav Stresemann was the dominant political figure*. Although he was Chancellor only from August until November 1923, he remained as foreign minister until his death in October 1929, thus providing vital continuity and a steadying hand.

The work of the Dawes Plan was carried a stage further by *the Young Plan, drawn up in October 1929* by the Allied Reparations Commission, under the leadership of an American financier, Owen Young. This reduced the reparations total from £6600 million to £2000 million, to be paid in annual instalments over 59 years. There were other successes for the republic in foreign affairs, thanks to the work of Stresemann (see Section 4.1), and it seemed stable and well established. But behind this success there remained some fatal weaknesses which were soon to bring disaster.

- 4 The prosperity was much more dependent on the American loans than most people realized. If the USA were to find itself in financial difficulties so that it was forced to stop the loans, or worse still, demand that they be paid back quickly, the German economy would be shaken again. Unfortunately this is exactly what happened in 1929.
- 5 Following the Wall Street Crash (October 1929), a world economic crisis developed (see Section 22.6). The USA stopped any further loans and began to call in many of the short-term loans already made to Germany. This caused a crisis of confidence in the currency and led to a run on the banks, many of which had to close. The industrial boom had led to worldwide over-production, and German exports, along with those of other countries, were severely reduced. Factories had to close, and by the middle of 1931 unemployment was approaching 4 million. Sadly for Germany, Stresemann, the politician best equipped to deal with the crisis, died of a heart attack in October 1929 at the early age of 51.
- 6 The government of Chancellor Brüning (Catholic Centre Party) reduced social services, unemployment benefit and the salaries and pensions of government officials, and stopped reparations payments. High tariffs were introduced to keep out foreign foodstuffs and thus help German farmers, while the government bought shares in factories hit by the slump. However, these measures did not produce quick results, though they did help after a time; unemployment continued to rise and by the spring of 1932 it stood at over 6 million. The government came under criticism from almost all groups in society, especially industrialists and the working class, who demanded more decisive action. The loss of much working-class support because of increasing unemployment and the reduction in unemployment benefit was a serious blow to the republic. By the end of 1932 the Weimar Republic had thus been brought to the verge of collapse. Even so, it might still have survived if there had been no other alternative.

(d) The alternative – Hitler and the Nazis

Hitler and the Nazi Party offered what seemed to be an attractive alternative just when the republic was at its most ineffective. The fortunes of the Nazi Party were linked closely to the economic situation: the more unstable the economy, the more seats the Nazis won in the *Reichstag*, as Table 14.2 shows. In the election of July 1932, with unemployment standing at over 6 million, the Nazis became the largest single party, winning 230 seats out of 608.

There is no doubt that the rise of Hitler and the Nazis, fostered by the economic crisis, was one of the most important causes of the downfall of the republic.

Table 14.2 **Nazi electoral success and the state of the economy, 1924–32**

<i>Date</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>State of economy</i>
March 1924	32	Still unstable after 1923 inflation
December 1924	14	Recovering after Dawes Plan
1928	12	Prosperity and stability
1930	107	Unemployment mounting – Nazis second largest party
July 1932	230	Massive unemployment – Nazis largest single party
November 1932	196	First signs of economic recovery

(e) What made the Nazis so popular?

- 1 *They offered national unity, prosperity and full employment* by ridding Germany of what they claimed were the real causes of the troubles – Marxists, the ‘November criminals’ (the people who had agreed to the armistice in November 1918 and later the Versailles Treaty), Jesuits, Freemasons and Jews. Increasingly the Nazis sought to lay the blame for Germany’s defeat in the First World War and all her subsequent problems on the Jews. Great play was made in Nazi propaganda with the ‘stab in the back’ myth – the idea that the German armies could have fought on but were betrayed by the traitors who had surrendered unnecessarily.
- 2 *They promised to overthrow the Versailles settlement*, which was so unpopular with most Germans, and to build Germany into a great power again. This would include bringing all Germans (in Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland) into the *Reich*.
- 3 *The Nazi private army, the SA (Sturmabteilung – Storm Troopers), was attractive* to young people out of work; it gave them a small wage and a uniform.
- 4 Wealthy landowners and industrialists encouraged the Nazis because *they feared a communist revolution* and they approved of the Nazi policy of hostility to communists. There is some controversy among historians about how far this support went. Some German Marxist historians claim that from the early 1920s the Nazis were financed by industrialists as an anti-communist force, that Hitler was, in effect, ‘a tool of the capitalists’. But historian Joachim Fest believes that the amounts of money involved have been greatly exaggerated, and that though some industrialists were secretly in favour of Hitler becoming Chancellor, it was only *after* he came to power that funds began to flow into the party coffers from big business.
- 5 *Hitler himself had extraordinary political abilities*. He possessed tremendous energy and willpower and a remarkable gift for public speaking, which enabled him to put forward his ideas with great emotional force. He used the latest modern communication techniques – mass rallies, parades, radio and film; he travelled all over Germany by air. Many Germans began to look towards him as some sort of Messiah (saviour) figure. A full version of his views and aims was set out in his book *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*), which he wrote in prison after the Beer-Hall Putsch.
- 6 *The striking contrast between the governments of the Weimar Republic and the Nazi Party impressed people*. The former were respectable, dull and unable to maintain law and order; the latter promised strong, decisive government and the restoration of national pride – an irresistible combination.
- 7 *Without the economic crisis, however, it is doubtful whether Hitler would have had much chance of attaining power*. It was the widespread unemployment and social misery, together with the fear of communism and socialism, that gained the Nazis mass support, not only among the working class (recent research suggests that between 1928 and 1932 the Nazis attracted over 2 million voters away from the socialist SPD), but also among the lower middle classes – office-workers, shop-keepers, civil servants, teachers and small-scale farmers.

In July 1932, then, the Nazis were the largest single party, but Hitler failed to become Chancellor, partly because the Nazis still lacked an overall majority (they had 230 seats out of 608 in the Reichstag), and because he was not yet quite ‘respectable’ – the conservative President Hindenburg viewed him as an upstart and refused to have him as Chancellor. Given these circumstances, *was it inevitable that Hitler would come to power?* This is still a matter for disagreement among historians. Some feel that by the autumn of 1932 nothing could have saved the Weimar Republic, and that consequently nothing could have kept Hitler out. Others believe that the first signs of economic improvement could be

seen, and that it should have been possible to block Hitler's progress. In fact Brüning's policies seem to have started to pay off, though he himself had been replaced as Chancellor by Franz von Papen (Conservative/Nationalist) in May 1932. This theory seems to be supported by the election results of November 1932, when the Nazis lost 34 seats and about 2 million votes, which was a serious setback for them. It seemed that perhaps the republic was weathering the storm and the Nazi challenge would fade out. However, at this point a further influence came into play, which killed off the republic by letting Hitler into power legally.

(f) Hitler becomes Chancellor (January 1933)

In the end it was political intrigue that brought Hitler to power. A small clique of right-wing politicians with support from the *Reichswehr* decided to bring Hitler into a coalition government with the Nationalists. The main conspirators were Franz von Papen and General Kurt von Schleicher. Their reasons for this momentous decision were:

- They were afraid of the Nazis attempting to seize power by a *Putsch*.
- They believed they could control Hitler better *inside* the government than if he remained outside it, and that a taste of power would make the Nazis modify their extremism.
- The Nationalists had only 37 seats in the *Reichstag* following the elections of July 1932. An alliance with the Nazis, who had 230 seats, would go a long way towards giving them a majority. The Nationalists did not believe in genuine democracy: they hoped that, with Nazi co-operation, they would be able to restore the monarchy and return to the system that had existed under Bismarck (Chancellor 1870–90), in which the Reichstag had much less power. Though this would destroy the Weimar Republic, these right-wing politicians were prepared to go ahead because it would give them a better chance of controlling the communists, who had just had their best result so far in the July election, winning 89 seats.

There was some complicated manoeuvring involving Papen, Schleicher and a group of wealthy businessmen; President Hindenburg was persuaded to dismiss Brüning and appoint Papen as Chancellor. They hoped to bring Hitler in as Vice-Chancellor, but he would settle for nothing less than being Chancellor himself. In January 1933 therefore, they persuaded Hindenburg to invite Hitler to become Chancellor with Papen as Vice-Chancellor, even though the Nazis had by then lost ground in the elections of November 1932. Papen still believed Hitler could be controlled, and remarked to a friend: 'In two months we'll have pushed Hitler into a corner so hard that he'll be squeaking.'

Hitler was able to come to power legally therefore, because all the other parties, including the *Reichswehr*, were so preoccupied with the threat from the communists that they did not sufficiently recognize the danger from the Nazis, and so failed to unite in opposition to them. It ought to have been possible to keep the Nazis out – they were losing ground and had nowhere near an overall majority. But instead of uniting with the other parties to exclude them, the Nationalists made the fatal mistake of *inviting* Hitler into power.

Could the Weimar Republic have survived?

Although there were signs of economic improvement by the end of 1932, it was perhaps inevitable, at that point, that the Weimar Republic would collapse, since the powerful conservative groups and the army were prepared to abandon it, and replace it with a conservative, nationalist and anti-democratic state similar to the one that had existed before 1914. In fact it is possible to argue that the Weimar Republic had already ceased to

exist in May 1932 when Hindenburg appointed Papen as Chancellor with responsibility to him, not to the *Reichstag*.

Was it inevitable that Hitler and the Nazis would come to power?

The majority view is that this need not have happened; Papen, Schleicher, Hindenburg and the others must take the blame for being prepared to invite him into power, and then failing to control him. According to Ian Kershaw, Hitler's most recent biographer:

There was no inevitability about Hitler's accession to power ... a Hitler Chancellorship might have been avoided. With the corner turning of the economic Depression, and with the Nazi movement facing potential break-up if power were not soon attained, the future – even under an authoritarian government – would have been very different. ... In fact, political miscalculation by those with regular access to the corridors of power rather than any action on the part of the Nazi leader played a larger role in placing him in the Chancellor's seat. ... The anxiety to destroy democracy rather than the keenness to bring the Nazis to power was what triggered the complex development that led to Hitler's Chancellorship.

However, there were some people in Germany, even on the right, who had misgivings about Hitler's appointment. Kershaw tells us that General Ludendorff, who had supported Hitler at the time of the 1923 Munich *Putsch*, now wrote to Hindenburg: 'You have delivered up our holy German Fatherland to one of the greatest demagogues of all time. I solemnly prophesy that this accursed man will cast our Reich into the abyss and bring our nation to inconceivable misery. Future generations will damn you in your grave for what you have done.'

14.2 WHAT DID NATIONAL SOCIALISM STAND FOR?

What it did *not* mean was nationalization and the redistribution of wealth. The word 'socialism' was included only to attract the support of the German workers, though it has to be admitted that Hitler did promise a better deal for workers. In fact it bore many similarities to Mussolini's fascism (see Section 13.2). *The movement's general principles were:*

- 1 It was more than just one political party among many. *It was a way of life dedicated to the rebirth of the nation.* All classes in society must be united into a 'national community' (*Volksgemeinschaft*) to make Germany a great nation again and restore national pride. Since the Nazis had the only correct way to achieve this, it followed that all other parties, especially communists, must be eliminated.
- 2 Great emphasis was laid *on the ruthlessly efficient organization of all aspects of the lives of the masses* under the central government, in order to achieve greatness, with violence and terror if necessary. The state was supreme; the interests of the individual always came second to the interests of the state, that is, *a totalitarian state* in which propaganda had a vital role to play.
- 3 Since it was likely that greatness could only be achieved by war, *the entire state must be organized on a military footing.*
- 4 *The race theory was vitally important* – mankind could be divided into two groups, Aryans and non-Aryans. The Aryans were the Germans, ideally tall, blond, blue-eyed and handsome; they were the master race, destined to rule the world. All the rest, such as Slavs, coloured peoples and particularly Jews, were inferior. They were to be excluded from the 'national community', along with other groups who

were considered unfit to belong, including gypsies and homosexuals. The Slavs were destined to become the slave race of the Germans.

All the various facets and details of the Nazi system sprang from these four basic concepts. There has been great debate among historians about whether National Socialism was a *natural development of German history, or whether it was a one-off, a distortion of normal development*. Many British and American historians argued that it was a natural extension of earlier Prussian militarism and German traditions. Historian Shelley Baranowski goes along with this interpretation (in *Nazi Empire*, 2010). She points out that before the First World War Germany's African colonies, including Tanganyika, Namibia, Cameroon and Togo, were difficult to control, and that Prussian military doctrine held that the complete destruction of all enemy forces must be the prime objective of any war. In the case of rebellious colonies, this became mixed in with racist elements, producing a genocidal mentality. In Tanganyika, following unrest and uprisings, almost half a million Africans were killed, some by deliberate starvation. An uprising in Namibia was dealt with in the same way. Similar trends were apparent during the First World War, after the defeat of the Russians. In March 1918 Germany gained control of former Russian territories containing a large proportion of Russia's coal, iron-ore and oil resources. In the few months before Germany's own surrender, German troops suppressed all nationalist movements in these territories with great brutality, treating the Slav inhabitants as second-class citizens. Baranowski suggests that Nazi brutality in eastern Europe during the Second World War was a revival and continuation of the Germans' pre-First-World-War attitudes, as was the creation of the concentration camps in 1933 for opponents of the Nazis. However, she does stop short of arguing that the Germans in general had developed a genocidal mentality that led directly to the Holocaust. As she puts it: 'The deliberate scouring of a whole continent, and potentially the entire surface of the globe for Jews to be carried off to assembly-line extermination in gas chambers or killing pits had no precedent.'

Marxist historians believed that National Socialism and fascism in general were the final stage and culmination of western capitalism, which was bound to collapse because of its fatal flaws. British historian R. Butler, writing in 1942, believed that 'National Socialism is the inevitable reappearance of Prussian militarism and terror, as seen during the 18th century.' Sir Lewis Namier, a Polish Jew who settled in Britain and became an eminent historian, was understandably bitter:

Attempts to absolve the German people of responsibility are unconvincing. And as for Hitler and his Third Reich, these arose from the people, indeed from the lower depths of the people. ... Friends of the Germans must ask themselves why individual Germans become useful, decent citizens, but in groups, both at home and abroad, are apt to develop tendencies that make them a menace to their fellow-men? (*Avenues of History*)

On the other hand, German historians like Gerhard Ritter and K. D. Bracher stressed the personal contribution of Hitler, arguing that Hitler was striving to break away from the past and introduce something completely new. National Socialism was therefore a grotesque departure from the normal and logical historical development. This is probably the majority view and it is one that found favour in Germany, since it meant that the German people, contrary to what Namier claimed, *can* be absolved from most of the blame.

Ian Kershaw recognizes that there are elements of both interpretations in Hitler's career. He points out that

the mentalities which conditioned the behaviour both of the elites and the masses, and which made Hitler's rise possible, were products of strands of German political culture

that were plainly recognizable in the twenty years or so before the First World War. ... Most of the elements of political culture that fed into Nazism were peculiarly German.

However, Kershaw is also clear that Hitler was not the logical, inevitable product of long-term trends in German culture and beliefs. Nor was he a mere accident in German history: 'without the unique conditions in which he came to prominence, Hitler would have been nothing. ... He exploited the conditions brilliantly.'

14.3 HITLER CONSOLIDATES HIS POWER

Hitler was an Austrian, the son of a customs official in Braunau-am-Inn on the German border. He had hoped to become an artist but failed to gain admittance to the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, and afterwards spent six down-and-out years living in Vienna dosshouses and developing his hatred of Jews. In Munich, Hitler had joined Anton Drexler's tiny German Workers' Party (1919), which he soon took over and transformed into the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP). Now, in January 1933, he was Chancellor of a coalition government of National Socialists and nationalists, but he was not yet satisfied with the amount of power he possessed: Nazis held only three out of eleven cabinet posts. He therefore insisted on a general election in the hope of winning an overall majority for the Nazis.

(a) The election of 5 March 1933

The election campaign was an extremely violent one. Since they were now in government, the Nazis were able to use all the apparatus of state, including the press and radio, to try and whip up a majority. They had a great advantage in that Hermann Goering, one of the leading Nazis, had been appointed minister of the interior for Prussia, the largest and most important German state. This meant that he controlled the police. He replaced senior police officers with reliable Nazis, and 50 000 auxiliary policemen were called up, most of them from the SA and the SS (*Schutzstaffeln* – Hitler's second private army, formed originally to be his personal bodyguard). They had orders to avoid hostility towards the SA and SS but to show no mercy to communists and other 'enemies of the state'. They were given permission to use firearms if necessary. Meetings of Nazis and nationalists were allowed to go ahead without interference, but communist and socialist political meetings were wrecked and speakers were beaten up, while police looked the other way. The nationalists went along with all this because they were determined to use the Nazis to destroy communism once and for all.

(b) The Reichstag fire

The climax of the election campaign came on the night of 27 February when the Reichstag was badly damaged by a fire, apparently started by a young Dutch anarchist called Marinus van der Lubbe, who was arrested, tried and executed for his pains. It has been suggested that the SA knew about van der Lubbe's plans, but allowed him to go ahead and even started fires of their own elsewhere in the building with the intention of blaming it on the communists. There is no conclusive evidence of this, but what is certain is that the fire played right into Hitler's hands: *he was able to use the fire to stir up fear of communism and as a pretext for the banning of the party*. Some four thousand communists were arrested and imprisoned. However, in spite of all their efforts, the Nazis still failed to win

an overall majority in the 5 March election. With almost 90 per cent of the electorate voting, the Nazis won 288 out of the 647 seats, 36 short of the magic figure – 324 – needed for an overall majority. The nationalists again won 52 seats. Hitler was still dependent on the support of Papen and Hugenberg (leader of the nationalists). This turned out to be the Nazis' best performance in a 'free' election, and they never won an overall majority. It is worth remembering that even at the height of their electoral triumph the Nazis were supported by only 44 per cent of the voting electorate.

14.4 HOW WAS HITLER ABLE TO STAY IN POWER?

(a) The Enabling Law, 23 March 1933

Hitler was not satisfied with the election result. He was determined that he must be dependent on nobody except his Nazi party. While President Hindenburg was still in shock after the Reichstag fire, Hitler apparently persuaded him that emergency legislation was vital to prevent a communist uprising. Known as the Enabling Law, this legislation was forced through the Reichstag on 23 March 1933, and it was this that provided the legal basis of Hitler's power. It stated that the government could introduce laws without the approval of the Reichstag for the next four years, could ignore the constitution and could sign agreements with foreign countries. All laws would be drafted by the Chancellor and come into operation the day they were published. This meant that Hitler was to be the complete dictator for the next four years, but since his will was now law, he would be able to extend the four-year period indefinitely. He no longer needed the support of Papen and Hugenberg; the Weimar constitution had been abandoned. Such a major constitutional change needed approval by a two-thirds majority, yet the Nazis hadn't even a simple majority.

How did the Nazis get the Enabling Bill through the Reichstag?

The method was typical of the Nazis. Since the election, the whole country had experienced a wave of unprecedented Nazi violence directed at political opponents and at Jews. Jewish synagogues were attacked and trashed by Hitler's brownshirts (SA), and there were countless beatings and murders. Hundreds more were arrested and sent to newly set-up concentration camps (see Illus. 14.2). On 23 March, the day of the Enabling Law vote, The Kroll Opera House (where the Reichstag had been meeting since the fire) was surrounded by Hitler's private armies. MPs had to push their way through solid ranks of SS troops to get into the building. The 81 communist MPs had either been arrested or were in hiding. Some of the socialists were simply not allowed to pass. Inside the building, rows of brown-shirted SA troops lined the walls, and the SS could be heard chanting outside: 'We want the Bill, or fire and murder.' It took courage to vote against the Enabling Bill in such surroundings. When the Catholic Centre Party decided to vote in favour of the Bill, the result was a foregone conclusion. Only the Social Democrats spoke against it, and it passed by 441 votes to 94 (all Social Democrats). The Nazi aim of killing off parliamentary democracy had been achieved, and by means that could in no way be called 'legal'. The Papen/Schleicher/Hindenburg plan to control Hitler had failed completely, and Ludendorff's prophecy was beginning to become reality.

(b) *Gleichschaltung*

Having effectively muzzled the *Reichstag*, Hitler immediately set about sidelining the Chancellery and the ministries. This was achieved by a policy known as *Gleichschaltung* (forcible co-ordination), which turned Germany into a totalitarian or fascist state. The



Illustration 14.2 Jewish people being taken to a concentration camp

government tried to control as many aspects of life as possible, using a huge police force and the notorious State Secret Police, the *Gestapo* (*Geheime Staatspolizei*). It became dangerous to oppose or criticize the government in any way. *The main features of the Nazi totalitarian state were:*

- 1 All political parties except the National Socialists were banned, so that Germany became *a one-party state* like Italy and the USSR. The Catholic Centre Party actually dissolved itself a week before the official ban was introduced!
- 2 The separate state parliaments (*Länder*) still existed but lost all power. Most of their functions were taken over by *a Nazi Special Commissioner*, appointed in each state by the Berlin government, who had complete power over all officials and affairs within his state. There were no more state, provincial or municipal elections.
- 3 *The civil service was purged*: all Jews and other suspected 'enemies of the state' were removed, so that it became fully reliable.
- 4 *Trade unions, a likely source of resistance, were abolished*, their funds confiscated and their leaders arrested. They were replaced by *the German Labour Front*, to which all workers had to belong. The government dealt with all grievances, and strikes were not allowed.
- 5 *The education system was closely controlled* so that children could be indoctrinated with Nazi opinions. School textbooks were often rewritten to fit in with Nazi theory, the most obvious examples being in history and biology. History was distorted to fit in with Hitler's view that great things could only be achieved by force. Human biology was dominated by the Nazi race theory. Teachers, lecturers and professors were closely watched to make sure they did not express opinions

which strayed from the party line, and many lived in fear in case they were reported to the Gestapo by children of convinced Nazis.

- 6 The system was supplemented by *the Hitler Youth*, which all boys had to join at 14; girls joined *the League of German Maidens*. The regime was deliberately trying to destroy traditional bonds such as loyalty to the family: children were taught that their first duty was to obey Hitler, who took on the title *Führer* (leader, or guide). The favourite slogan was 'the Führer is always right'. Children were even encouraged to betray their parents to the *Gestapo*, and many did so. These youth organizations worked on the assumption that the Nazi regime would remain in power for many generations; there was much talk of 'the thousand-year Reich'. This is why the present generation of young people had to be thoroughly indoctrinated to provide a firm foundation for the regime. The vital element was: they must become steeped in militaristic values. In a speech in Nuremberg in September 1935, Hitler told the crowd: 'What we look for from our German youth is different from what people wanted in the past. In our eyes, the German youth of the future must be slim and slender, swift as the greyhound, tough as leather, and hard as Krupp steel. We must educate a new type of man so that our people are not ruined by the symptoms of degeneracy of our day.'
- 7 *There was a special policy concerned with the family.* The Nazis were worried that the birth rate was declining, and therefore 'racially pure' and healthy families were encouraged to have more children. Family planning centres were closed down and contraceptives banned. Mothers who responded well were awarded medals – the Cross of Honour of the German Mother; a mother of eight children gained a gold medal, six children a silver medal, and four children a bronze medal. On the other hand, people who were considered 'undesirable' were discouraged from having children. These included Jews, gypsies, and people deemed to be physically or mentally unfit. In 1935, marriages between Aryans and Jews were forbidden; over 300 000 people who were designated as 'unfit' were forcibly sterilized to prevent them having children.
- 8 *All communications and the media were controlled by the minister of propaganda, Dr Joseph Goebbels.* Leni Riefenstahl, a brilliant young film director, was invited personally by Hitler to work for the Nazis; she made an impressive film of the 1934 Nuremberg party rally. Using 30 cameras and a crew of 120, she produced a documentary the like of which had never been seen before. When it was released in March 1935 under the title *Triumph of the Will*, it was widely acclaimed; it even won a gold medal at the Venice Film Festival in 1935. But it was more than an ordinary documentary. In the words of Richard J. Evans, the 'will' in question was 'not only that of the German people, but also and above all, the will of Hitler, whom her cameras almost invariably portrayed standing alone. ... In the final stages of the film the screen was filled with columns of marching stormtroopers, and black-shirted, steel-helmeted SS men, leaving audiences no room for doubt. It was a propaganda film designed to convince Germany and the world of the power, strength and determination of the German people under Hitler's leadership.' No further films were made about Hitler himself – *Triumph of the Will* had said it all. However, the state gradually increased its control over the cinema so that only feature films approved by the regime could be shown.

Radio, newspapers, magazines, books, theatre, music and art were all supervised. The government made cheap radios available so that by 1939 over 70 per cent of German households owned a 'wireless' set. But as John Traynor puts it: 'While people may have appreciated the material benefit this represented, we cannot know for certain what they came to think of the relentless message that poured constantly from their radio set.' A national book-burning day was held on

10 May 1933 when thousands of books by Jewish, socialist and other 'suspect' writers were publicly burned on huge bonfires in Germany's university cities. By the end of 1934 about 4000 books were on the forbidden list because they were 'un-German'. It was impossible to perform the plays of Bertolt Brecht (a communist) or the music of Felix Mendelssohn and Gustav Mahler (they were Jewish). American jazz was popular with young people, but Hitler hated it and tried to exclude it from Germany. But it was so widespread in nightclubs and dance halls that it proved impossible to eliminate it completely.

Hitler had a special interest in art, having once tried to make a career as an artist. He was soon announcing that it was time for a new type of art – German art. The idea that art was international must be rejected out of hand because it was decadent and Jewish. A wide variety of artists was condemned and their works removed from galleries. They included Jewish, abstract, left-wing, modernist and all foreign artists, whatever their style. Hitler even condemned the French impressionists simply because they were not German. On 20 March 1939 about 5000 condemned paintings and drawings were burnt on a massive bonfire outside the central fire station in Berlin. Artists, writers and scholars were continually harassed until it became pointless to produce any artwork that did not win the approval of the regime, and it was impossible to express any opinion which did not fit in with the Nazi system. By these methods public opinion could be moulded and mass support assured, or so the Nazis hoped.

- 9 *The economic life of the country was closely organized.* Although the Nazis (unlike the communists) had no special ideas about the economy, they did have some basic aims: *to eliminate unemployment and to make Germany self-sufficient by boosting exports and reducing imports, a policy known as 'autarky'*. The idea was to put the economy onto a war footing, so that all the materials necessary for waging war could be produced, as far as possible, in Germany itself. This would ensure that Germany would never again be hamstrung by a trade blockade like the one imposed by the Allies during the First World War. The centrepiece of the policy was the Four-Year Plan introduced in 1936 under the direction of Hermann Goering, the head of the *Luftwaffe* (the German air force). Policies included:

- telling industrialists what to produce, depending on what the country needed at that moment; and closing factories down if their products were not required;
- moving workers around the country to places where jobs existed and labour was needed;
- encouraging farmers to increase agricultural yields;
- controlling food prices and rents;
- manipulating foreign exchange rates to avoid inflation;
- introducing vast schemes of public works – slum clearance, land drainage and *autobahn* (motorway) building;
- forcing foreign countries to buy German goods, either by refusing to pay cash for goods bought from those countries, so that they had to accept German goods instead (often armaments), or by refusing permission to foreigners with bank accounts in Germany to withdraw their cash, so that they had to spend it in Germany on German goods;
- manufacturing synthetic rubber and wool and experimenting to produce petrol from coal in order to reduce dependence on foreign countries;
- increasing expenditure on armaments; in 1938–9 the military budget accounted for 52 per cent of government spending. This was an incredible amount for 'peacetime'. As Richard Overy puts it: 'this stemmed from

Hitler's desire to turn Germany into an economic and military superpower before the rest of the world caught up'.

- 10 *Religion was brought under state control*, since the churches were a possible source of opposition. At first Hitler moved cautiously with both Roman Catholics and Protestants.

- **The Roman Catholic Church**

In 1933 Hitler signed an agreement (known as the *Concordat*) with the pope, in which he promised not to interfere with German Catholics in any way; in return they agreed to dissolve the Catholic Centre Party and take no further part in politics. But relations soon became strained when the government broke the Concordat by dissolving the Catholic Youth League because it rivalled the Hitler Youth. When the Catholics protested, their schools were closed down. By 1937 Catholics were completely disillusioned with the Nazis, and Pope Pius XI issued an Encyclical (a letter to be read out in all Roman Catholic churches in Germany) in which he condemned the Nazi movement for being 'hostile to Christ and his Church'. Hitler was unimpressed, however, and thousands of priests and nuns were arrested and sent to concentration camps.

- **The Protestant Churches**

Since a majority of Germans belonged to one or other of the various Protestant groups, Hitler tried to organize them into a '*Reich Church*' with a Nazi as the first *Reich* bishop. But many pastors (priests) objected and a group of them, led by Martin Niemöller, protested to Hitler about government interference and about his treatment of the Jews. Once again the Nazis were completely ruthless – Niemöller and over 800 other pastors were sent to concentration camps (Niemöller himself managed to survive for eight years until he was liberated in 1945). Hundreds more were arrested later and the rest were forced to swear an oath of obedience to the Führer.

Eventually the persecutions appeared to bring the churches under control, but resistance continued, and the churches were the only organizations to keep up a quiet protest campaign against the Nazi system. For example, in 1941 some Catholic bishops protested against the Nazi policy of killing mentally handicapped and mentally ill people in German asylums. Over 70 000 people were murdered in this 'euthanasia' campaign. Hitler publicly ordered the mass killings to be stopped, but evidence suggests that they still continued.

- 11 *Above all, Germany was a police state*. The police, helped by the SS and the Gestapo, tried to prevent all open opposition to the regime. The law courts were not impartial: 'enemies of the state' rarely received a fair trial, and *the concentration camps* introduced by Hitler in 1933 were full. The main ones before 1939 were Dachau near Munich, Buchenwald near Weimar and Sachsenhausen near Berlin. They contained 'political' prisoners – communists, Social Democrats, Catholic priests, Protestant pastors. Other persecuted groups were homosexuals and above all, Jews; perhaps as many as 15 000 homosexual men were sent to the camps, where they were made to wear pink triangle badges.

However, recent research in Germany has shown that the police state was not as efficient as used to be thought. The Gestapo was understaffed; for example, there were only 43 officials to police Essen, a city with a population of 650 000. They had to rely heavily on ordinary people coming forward with information to

denounce others. After 1943, as people became more disillusioned with the war, they were less willing to help the authorities, and the Gestapo's job became more difficult.

- 12 *The worst aspect of the Nazi system was Hitler's anti-Semitic (anti-Jewish) policy.* There were only just over half a million Jews in Germany, less than one per cent of the total population, but Hitler decided to use them as scapegoats for everything – the humiliation at Versailles, the depression, unemployment and communism. He began by talking in terms of racial purity – the Aryan race, especially the Germans, must be kept free from contamination by the non-Aryan Jews. This is why they must be cleared out of Germany. In 1925 he wrote in his book *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) about the time in Vienna when he was converted to anti-Semitism. He saw:

a phenomenon in a black caftan and wearing black sidelocks. ... The longer I gazed at this strange countenance, the more the question shaped itself in my brain: is this a German? ... As soon as I began to investigate the matter, Vienna appeared to me in a new light: was there any shady undertaking, any form of foulness, especially in cultural life, in which at least one Jew did not participate? In putting the probing knife to that kind of abscess one immediately discovered, like a maggot in a putrescent body, a little Jew who was often blinded by the sudden light.

Ian Kershaw suggests that this was probably a dramatization, since he was known to have been reading anti-Semitic newspapers before he went to live in Vienna. In fact the Jewish community played an important role in the cultural, scientific and business life of Germany, but Hitler would allow them no credit for that. In many speeches before he became Chancellor he spoke about them in the most extreme language. As soon as he became Chancellor, his supporters took it as a licence to begin persecuting the Jews. However, when the government declared a boycott of Jewish shops for 1 April 1933, the expected mass support was not forthcoming. The general public seemed apathetic, and some people even showed sympathy for the Jewish shops. Hitler decided that restraint was called for; clearly people's main concerns were elsewhere. Consequently further boycotts were cancelled and the focus moved to attempts to strengthen the economy.

By 1935 Hitler's attitude had hardened again and he claimed that there was a world Jewish/communist plot to take control. He seemed to assume that communism was a Jewish movement, probably because many of the leading Russian Bolsheviks were Jewish. This, Hitler believed, would plunge the world into a new Dark Age, unless the Germans were able to thwart the plot. Lots of Germans were in such a desperate situation that they were prepared to accept the propaganda about the Jews and were not sorry to see thousands of them removed from their jobs as lawyers, doctors, teachers and journalists. Robert Gellately (in *Backing Hitler*, 2001) shows that many ordinary Germans actively participated in the atrocities against the Jews, helped themselves to stolen Jewish property and happily took jobs vacated by Jews. Gotz Aly also asked the question: 'What drove ordinary Germans to tolerate and commit historically unprecedented crimes against humanity?' His answer is that ordinary Germans co-operated in genocide because they benefited from it in material terms. The anti-Jewish campaign inside Germany was given legal status by the *Nuremberg Laws* (1935), which deprived Jews of their German citizenship, forbade them to marry non-Jews (to preserve the purity of the Aryan race), and ruled that even a person with only one Jewish grandparent must be classed as a Jew.

Until 1938 Hitler still proceeded relatively cautiously with the anti-Jewish policy, probably because he was concerned about unfavourable foreign reaction. Later the campaign became more extreme. In November 1938, he authorized what became known as

Kristallnacht (the ‘Night of Broken Glass’), a vicious attack on Jewish synagogues and other property throughout the whole country. When the Second World War began, the plight of the Jews deteriorated rapidly. They were harassed in every possible way; their property was attacked and burnt, shops looted, synagogues destroyed, and Jews themselves herded into concentration camps. Eventually the terrible nature of what Hitler called his ‘Final Solution’ of the Jewish problem became clear: *he intended to exterminate the entire Jewish race*. During the war, as the Germans occupied such countries as Czechoslovakia, Poland and western Russia, he was able to lay his hands on non-German Jews as well. It is believed that by 1945, out of a total of 9 million Jews living in Europe at the outbreak of the Second World War, about 5.7 million had been murdered, most of them in the gas chambers of the Nazi extermination camps. The *Holocaust*, as it became known, was the worst and most shocking of the many crimes against humanity committed by the Nazi regime (see Section 6.8 for full details).

(c) **Hitler’s policies were popular with many sections of the German people**

It would be wrong to give the impression that Hitler hung on to power simply by terrorizing the entire nation. True, if you were a Jew, a communist or a socialist, or if you persisted in protesting and criticizing the Nazis, you would run into trouble; but many people who had no great interest in politics could usually live quite happily under the Nazis. This was because Hitler took care to please many important groups in society. Even as late as 1943, when the fortunes of war had turned against Germany, Hitler somehow retained his popularity with ordinary people. Gotz Aly (in *Hitler’s Beneficiaries*, 2007) argues that the Nazis were as much socialist as they were nationalist, and that they genuinely tried to make life better for ordinary Germans. Hitler told a reporter that his ambition was to raise the general standard of living and make the German people rich.

- 1 His arrival in power in January 1933 caused a great wave of enthusiasm and anticipation after the weak and indecisive governments of the Weimar Republic. *Hitler seemed to be offering action and a great new Germany*. He was careful to foster this enthusiasm by military parades, torchlight processions and firework displays, the most famous of which were the huge rallies held every year in Nuremberg, which seemed to appeal to the masses.
- 2 *Hitler was successful in eliminating unemployment*. This was probably the most important reason for his popularity with ordinary people. When he came to power the unemployment figure still stood at over 6 million, but by the end of 1935 it had dropped to just over two million, and by 1939 it was negligible. *How was this achieved?* The public works schemes provided thousands of extra jobs. A large party bureaucracy was set up now that the party was expanding so rapidly, and this provided thousands of extra office and administrative posts. There were purges of Jews and anti-Nazis from the civil service and from many other jobs connected with law, education, journalism, broadcasting, the theatre and music, leaving large numbers of vacancies. Conscription was reintroduced in 1935. Rearmament was started in 1934 and gradually speeded up. Thus Hitler had provided what the unemployed had been demanding in their marches in 1932: work and bread (*Arbeit und Brot*).
- 3 *Care was taken to keep the support of the workers* once it had been gained by the provision of jobs. This was important because the abolition of trade unions still rankled with many of them. The Strength through Joy Organization (*Kraft durch Freude*) provided benefits such as subsidized holidays in Germany and abroad, cruises, skiing holidays, cheap theatre and concert tickets and convalescent homes.

Gotz Aly looked at documents from the former East German archives which show in detail that the Nazis passed scores of laws extending and increasing social security provision, doubling workers' holiday entitlement, with pay, and making it more difficult for landlords to increase rents and evict tenants. According to Aly, the Nazi dictatorship was built not on terror but on a mutual calculation of interest between leaders and people.

- 4 *Wealthy industrialists and businessmen were delighted with the Nazis* in spite of the government's interference with their industries. This was partly because they now felt safe from a communist revolution, and because they were glad to be rid of trade unions, which had constantly pestered them with demands for shorter working hours and increased wages. In addition they were able to buy back at low prices the shares they had sold to the state during the crisis of 1929–32, and there was promise of great profits from the public works schemes, rearmament and other orders which the government placed with them.
- 5 *Farmers, though doubtful about Hitler at first, gradually warmed towards the Nazis* as soon as it became clear that farmers were in a specially favoured position in the state because of the declared Nazi aim of self-sufficiency in food production. Prices of agricultural produce were fixed so that they were assured of a reasonable profit. Farms were declared to be hereditary estates, and on the death of the owner, had to be passed on to his next of kin. This meant that a farmer could not be forced to sell or mortgage his farm to pay off his debts, and was welcomed by many farmers who were heavily in debt as a result of the financial crisis.
- 6 *Hitler gained the support of the Reichswehr (army)*, which was crucial if he was to feel secure in power. The *Reichswehr* was the one organization which could have removed him by force. Yet by the summer of 1934, Hitler had won it over:
 - Although some of the generals thought that Hitler was a contemptible upstart, on the whole the officer class was well-disposed towards him because of his much publicized aim of setting aside the restrictions of the Versailles Treaty by rearmament and expansion of the army to its full strength.
 - There had been a steady infiltration of National Socialists into the lower ranks, and this was beginning to work through to the lower officer classes.
 - the army leaders were much impressed by Hitler's handling of the troublesome SA in the notorious *Rohm Purge* (also known as 'the Night of the Long Knives') of 30 June 1934.

The background to this was that the SA, under their leader Ernst Röhm, a personal friend of Hitler from the early days of the movement, was becoming an embarrassment to the new Chancellor. Röhm wanted his brownshirts to be merged with the *Reichswehr* and himself made a general. Hitler knew that the aristocratic *Reichswehr* generals would not hear of either; they considered the SA to be little more than a bunch of gangsters, while Röhm himself was known to be a homosexual (which was frowned on in army circles as well as officially among the Nazis) and had criticized the generals in public for their stiff-necked conservatism. There were also divisions within Nazi ranks: some leading Nazis, including Gregor Strasser and Röhm himself, repeatedly urged Hitler to be more radical and socialist in his policies. Again, this was something that would not be to the taste of the Nationalists and the army. Röhm had enemies in the party; Hermann Goering and Heinrich Himmler, who were both busy building up their own power bases, also felt that Röhm was getting too powerful. Himmler told Hitler that Röhm was planning to use his SA to seize power from Hitler (see Illus. 14.3). Apparently this caused Hitler to make up his mind – for all these reasons Röhm must be removed.



Illustration 14.3 **Hitler and the *Sturmabteilung* (SA) at a Nuremberg Rally**

Hitler's solution to the problem was typical of Nazi methods – ruthless but efficient; he used one of his private armies to deal with the other. Röhm and most of the SA leaders were murdered by SS troops, and Hitler seized the opportunity to have a number of other enemies and critics murdered who had nothing to do with the SA. For example, two of Papen's advisers were shot dead by the SS because ten days earlier Papen had made a speech at Marburg criticizing Hitler. Papen himself was probably saved only by the fact that he was a close friend of President Hindenburg. It is thought that at least 400 people were murdered during that one night or soon afterwards. Hitler justified his actions by claiming that they were all plotting against the state.

The German historian Lothar Machtan, in his book *The Hidden Hitler* (2000), suggested that Hitler was a homosexual who had a series of relationships with young men during his early days in Vienna and Munich, which Röhm and his friends knew all about. If Machtan is right, then another explanation for the purge was the need for Hitler to safeguard his reputation, as the rift between himself and Röhm widened. 'Hitler's principal motive for taking action against Röhm and associates was fear of exposure and blackmail. ... The elimination of witnesses and evidence – *that* was the real purpose of this act of terrorism.'

Whatever Hitler's true motives, *the purge had important results*: the *Reichswehr* were relieved to be rid of the troublesome SA leaders and impressed by Hitler's decisive handling of the problem. When President Hindenburg died only a month later, the *Reichswehr* agreed that Hitler should become president as well as Chancellor (though he preferred to be known as the *Führer*). The *Reichswehr* took an oath of allegiance to the *Führer*.

- 7 Finally, Hitler's foreign policy was a brilliant success. With each successive triumph, more and more Germans began to think of him as infallible (see Section 5.3).

14.5 NAZISM AND FASCISM

There is sometimes confusion about the meaning of the terms 'Nazism' and 'fascism'. Mussolini started the first fascist party, in Italy; later the term was used, not entirely accurately, to describe other right-wing movements and governments. In fact, each brand of so-called 'fascism' had its own special features; in the case of the German Nazis, there were many similarities with Mussolini's fascist system, but also some important differences.

(a) Similarities

- Both were intensely anti-communist and, because of this, drew a solid basis of support from all classes.
- They were anti-democratic and attempted to organize a totalitarian state, controlling industry, agriculture and the way of life of the people, so that personal freedom was limited.
- They attempted to make the country self-sufficient.
- They emphasized the close unity of all classes working together to achieve these ends.
- Both emphasized the supremacy of the state, were intensely nationalistic, glorifying war, and the cult of the hero/leader who would guide the rebirth of the nation from its troubles.

(b) Differences

- Fascism never seemed to take root in Italy as deeply as the Nazi system did in Germany.
- The Italian system was not as efficient as that in Germany. The Italians never came anywhere near achieving self-sufficiency and never eliminated unemployment; in fact unemployment rose. The Nazis succeeded in eliminating unemployment, though they never achieved complete autarky.
- The Italian system was not as ruthless or as brutal as that in Germany and there were no mass atrocities, though there were unpleasant incidents like the murders of Matteotti and Amendola.
- Italian fascism was not particularly anti-Jewish or racist until 1938, when Mussolini adopted the policy to emulate Hitler.
- Mussolini was more successful than Hitler with his religious policy after his agreement with the pope in 1929.
- Finally, their constitutional positions were different: the monarchy still remained in Italy, and though Mussolini normally ignored Victor Emmanuel, the king played a vital role in 1943 when Mussolini's critics turned to him as head of state. He was able to announce Mussolini's dismissal and order his arrest. Unfortunately there was nobody in Germany who could dismiss Hitler.

14.6 HOW SUCCESSFUL WAS HITLER IN DOMESTIC AFFAIRS?

There are conflicting views about this. Some argue that Hitler's regime brought many benefits to the majority of the German people. Others believe that his whole career was a complete disaster and that his so-called successes were a myth created by Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi minister of propaganda. Taking the argument a step further, some German historians claim that Hitler was a weak ruler who never actually initiated any policy of his own.

(a) Successful?

One school of thought claims that the Nazis were successful up to 1939 because they provided many benefits of the sort mentioned above in Section 14.4(c), and developed a flourishing economy. Hence Hitler's great popularity with the masses, which endured well on into the 1940s, in spite of the hardships of the war. If only Hitler had succeeded in keeping Germany out of war, so the theory goes, all would have been well, and his Third Reich might have lasted a thousand years (as he boasted it would).

(b) Only superficially successful?

The opposing view is that Hitler's supposed successes were superficial and could not stand the test of time. The so-called 'economic miracle' was an illusion; there was a huge budget deficit and the country was, technically, bankrupt. Even the superficial success was achieved by methods unacceptable in a modern civilized society:

- Full employment was achieved only at the cost of a brutal anti-Jewish campaign and a massive rearmament programme.
- Self-sufficiency was not possible unless Germany was able to take over and exploit large areas of eastern Europe belonging to Poland, Czechoslovakia and Russia.
- Permanent success therefore depended on success in war; thus there was no possibility of Hitler keeping out of war (see also Section 5.3(a)).
- Nor was there much evidence of any improvement in the standard of living of ordinary people, which Hitler claimed was one of his main aims. As Richard J. Evans points out: 'Most statistical investigations are agreed that the economic situation of the majority of middle-class wage-earners did not markedly improve between 1933 and 1939.' As concentration on rearmament increased, there were shortages of food and other important goods; in fact the per capita consumption of many basic food-stuffs declined in the mid-1930s. Any wage increases came about only through working longer hours.

The conclusion must therefore be, as Alan Bullock wrote in his biography of Hitler, that

Recognition of the benefits which Hitler's rule brought to Germany needs to be tempered by the realization that for the Fuhrer – and for a considerable section of the German people – these were by-products of his true purpose, the creation of an instrument of power with which to realize a policy of expansion that in the end was to admit no limits.

Even the policy of preparedness for war failed; Hitler's plans were designed to be completed during the early 1940s, probably around 1942. In 1939 Germany's economy

was not ready for a major war, although it was strong enough to defeat Poland and France. However, as Richard Overy points out, 'the large programmes of war production were not yet complete, some barely started. ... The German economy was caught in 1939 midway through the transformation anticipated ... as Hitler ruefully reflected some years later, militarization had been "mismanaged".' Adam Tooze argues that Hitler resisted pressure from his advisers to prepare for a long war because he believed that Germany had no chance of winning a long war. In fact, in the first year of the war most of the increased military expenditure went on the production of aircraft, artillery and ammunition for the war in the West, which was expected to be fairly short. Only then would preparations be made for the attack on Russia.

(c) The Hitler myth

Given that all Hitler's work ended in disastrous failure, this raises a number of questions: for example, why was he so popular for so long? Was he genuinely popular, or did people merely put up with Hitler and the Nazis through fear of what would happen to them if they complained too loudly? Was his popular image just a myth created by Goebbels's propaganda machine?

There can be no doubt that Hitler's achievements in foreign affairs were extremely popular; with each new success – announcement of rearmament, remilitarization of the Rhineland, the *Anschluss* with Austria and the incorporation of Czechoslovakia into the Reich, it seemed that Germany was reasserting its rightful position as a great power. This was where Goebbels's propaganda probably had its greatest impact on public opinion, building up Hitler's image as the charismatic and infallible Messiah who was destined to restore the greatness of the Fatherland. Even though there was little enthusiasm for war, Hitler's popularity reached new heights in the summer of 1940 with the rapid defeat of France.

There is evidence too that Hitler himself was genuinely popular, although some sections of the Nazi party were not. Gotz Aly argued that ordinary Germans genuinely believed Hitler's promise that he would raise their living standards and many of them had personal experience of improvement. Ian Kershaw, in his earlier work, *The Hitler Myth*, showed that Hitler was seen as being somehow above the unpleasantness of day-to-day politics, and people did not associate him with the excesses of the more extreme party members. The middle and propertied classes were grateful that Hitler had restored law and order; they even approved of the concentration camps, believing that communists and other 'anti-social troublemakers' deserved to be sent there. The propaganda machine helped, by portraying the camps as centres of re-education where undesirables were turned into useful citizens.

However, Richard J. Evans (in *The Third Reich in Power*, 2006) does not go along with the view that Hitler enjoyed widespread support after his first few years in power. He believes that the endless propaganda – in the newspapers, over the radio, in the cinema and in the theatre – together with the experiments in education, the limits on what types of culture were allowed and the constant military parades and Nazi celebrations simply led to boredom and escapism after the initial novelty wore off. Evans argues that the relative lack of opposition can be at least partly explained by the fact that people developed survival strategies, keeping clear of politics and immersing themselves in private, family and church life. Fear of arrest and violence were still the main reason why the vast majority of people merely tolerated the Nazis. There can be no doubt that it was difficult and risky to criticize the regime; the government controlled all the media, so that the normal channels of criticism that exist in a modern democratic society were not available to ordinary Germans. Anyone who tried even to initiate discussion about Nazi policies risked the threats of informers, the Gestapo and the concentration camps.

It was during 1941 that Hitler's image became seriously tarnished. As the war dragged on, and Hitler declared war on the USA, doubts about his infallibility began to creep in. The realization gradually dawned that the war could not be won. In February 1943, as news of the German surrender at Stalingrad spread, a group of students at Munich university courageously issued a manifesto: 'The nation is deeply shaken by the destruction of the men of Stalingrad ... the World War 1 corporal has senselessly and irresponsibly driven three hundred and thirty thousand German men to death and ruin. Führer, we thank you!' Six of the leaders were arrested by the Gestapo and executed, and several others were given lengthy jail sentences. After that the majority of people remained loyal to Hitler, and there was no popular uprising against him. The only significant attempt to overthrow him was made by a group of army leaders in July 1944; after the failure of that plot to blow Hitler up, the general public remained loyal to the bitter end, partly through fear of the consequences if they were seen to have turned against the Nazis, and partly through fatalism and resignation.

(d) A weak dictator?

It was the German historian Hans Mommsen, writing in 1966, who first suggested that Hitler was a 'weak dictator'. He meant, apparently, that in spite of all the propaganda about the charismatic leader and the man of destiny, Hitler had no special programme or plan, and simply exploited circumstances as they occurred. Martin Broszat, in his 1969 book *The Hitler State*, developed this theme further, arguing that many of the policies attributed to Hitler were in fact instigated or pressed on him by others and then taken up by Hitler.

The opposite view, that Hitler was an all-powerful dictator, also has its strong proponents. Norman Rich, in *Hitler's War Aims* (vol. 1, 1973), believed that Hitler was 'master in the Third Reich'. Eberhard Jäckel has consistently held to the same interpretation ever since his first book about Hitler appeared in 1984 (*Hitler in History*): he used the term 'monocracy' to describe Hitler's 'sole rule'.

In his recent massive, two-volume biography of Hitler, Ian Kershaw suggests a 'half-and-half' interpretation. He emphasizes the theory of 'working towards the Führer' – a phrase used in a speech in 1934 by a Nazi official who was explaining how government policy took shape:

It is the duty of every single person, to attempt in the spirit of the Führer to work towards him. Anyone making mistakes will notice it soon enough. But the one who works correctly towards the Führer along his lines and towards his aim, will in future have the finest reward of suddenly one day attaining the legal confirmation of his work.

Kershaw explains how this worked: 'initiatives were taken, pressures created, legislation instigated – all in ways which fell into line with what were taken to be Hitler's aims, and without the dictator necessarily having to dictate. ... In this way, policy became increasingly radicalized.' The classic example of this way of working was the gradual introduction of the Nazi campaign against the Jews (see Section 6.8). It was a method of working which had the advantage that if any policy went wrong, Hitler could dissociate himself from it and blame somebody else.

In practice, therefore, this was hardly the method of a 'weak dictator'. Nor did he always wait for people to 'work towards him'. When occasion demanded it, he was the one who took the initiative and got what he wanted; for example, all his early foreign policy successes, the suppression of the SA in 1934, and the decisions that he took in 1939–40 during the early part of the war, when he reached the peak of his popularity – there was

nothing weak about any of this. People who knew him well recognized how he became more 'masterful' as his confidence grew. Otto Dietrich, Hitler's Press Chief, described in his memoirs how Hitler changed: he 'began to hate objections to his views and doubts on their infallibility. ... He wanted to speak, but not to listen. He wanted to be the hammer, not the anvil.'

Clearly Hitler could not have carried out Nazi policies without the support of many influential groups in society – the army, big business, heavy industry, the law courts and the civil service. But equally, without Hitler at the head, much of what happened during those terrible 12 years of the Third Reich would have been unthinkable. Ian Kershaw provides this chilling verdict on Hitler and his regime:

Never in history has such ruination – physical and moral – been associated with the name of one man. ... Hitler's name justifiably stands for all time as that of the chief instigator of the most profound collapse of civilization in modern times. ... Hitler was the main instigator of a war leaving over 50 million dead and millions more grieving their lost ones and trying to put their shattered lives together again. Hitler was the chief inspiration of a genocide the like of which the world had never known. ... The Reich whose glory he had sought lay at the end wrecked. ... The arch-enemy, Bolshevism, stood in the Reich capital itself and presided over half of Europe.

FURTHER READING

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QUESTIONS

- 1 Describe how the Weimar government and constitution came into existence after the end of the First World War, and explain why the Republic was so unstable in the years 1919 to 1923.
- 2 'The political instability of the Weimar Republic in the years 1919 to 1923 was largely the result of flaws in the constitution.' Explain why you agree or disagree with this interpretation of events.
- 3 How far would you agree that it was political intrigue rather than the economic situation that enabled Hitler to come to power in Germany in January 1933?
- 4 How far was the popularity of Nazi ideology responsible for the success of the Nazi Party in the elections of 1930 to 1932?
 - (a) Explain why Hitler introduced the Enabling Law in March 1933.
 - (b) 'Hitler's dictatorship was complete by August 1934 and it was achieved entirely by legal means.' Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.
- 5 To what extent did Hitler bring about a political, economic and social revolution in Nazi Germany in the years 1933 to 1939?
- 6
 - (a) Explain why the Nazis encouraged membership of the Hitler Youth and the League of German Maidens.
 - (b) 'In the years 1933 to 1939 there was support for the Nazis from all sections of German society.' Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.
- 7
 - (a) Explain why the Nazis wanted control over the media.
 - (b) How far would you agree or disagree with the view that the various forms of Nazi propaganda had very little impact on the German people by 1939?
- 8 How far would you agree that the main reason for Hitler's persecution of the Jews was that he was committed to racial purity?



There is a document question about how the Nazi state was run on the website.