

Hitler and the Nazis Take Over Germany

In the early 1930s, the mood in Germany was grim. The worldwide economic depression had hit the country especially hard, and millions of people were out of work. Still fresh in the minds of many was Germany's humiliating defeat fifteen years earlier during World War I, and Germans lacked confidence in their weak government. These conditions provided the chance for the rise of a new leader, Adolf Hitler, and his party, the National Socialist German Workers' Party, or Nazi party for short.

Hitler was a powerful and spellbinding speaker who attracted a wide following of Germans desperate for change. He promised a better life and a new and glorious Germany. The Nazis appealed especially to the unemployed, young people, and members of the lower middle class (small store owners, office employees, craftsmen, and farmers).

After Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany in January 1933, he moved quickly to turn Germany into a one-party dictatorship and to organize the police power necessary to enforce Nazi policies. He persuaded his followers to end individual freedoms, including freedom of press, speech, and assembly. Individuals lost the right to privacy, which meant that officials could read people's mail, listen in on telephone conversations, and search private homes without a warrant.

Hitler also relied on terror to achieve his goals. Lured by the feeling of comradeship, tens of thousands of young jobless men put on the brown shirts and high leather boots of the Nazi Storm Troopers. Called the SA, these men took to the streets to beat up and kill opponents of the Nazi regime. Fear of the SA pressured into silence other Germans who did not support the Nazis.

SS POLICE STATE

An important tool of Nazi terror was the Protective Squad (Schutzstaffel), or SS, which began as a special guard for Adolf Hitler and other party leaders. The black-shirted SS members formed a smaller, elite group whose members also served as auxiliary policemen and, later, as concentration camp guards. Eventually overshadowing the Storm Troopers (SA) in importance, the SS became, after 1934, the private army of the Nazi party, led by Heinrich Himmler.

NAZI PROPAGANDA

Once they succeeded in ending democracy and turning Germany into a one-party dictatorship, the Nazis orchestrated a massive propaganda campaign to win the loyalty

and cooperation of Germans. The Nazi Propaganda Ministry, directed by Dr. Joseph Goebbels, took control of all forms of communication in Germany: newspapers, magazines, books, public meetings, and rallies, art, music, movies, and radio. Viewpoints in any way threatening to Nazi beliefs or to the regime were eliminated from all media. During the spring of 1933, Nazi student organizations, professors, and librarians made up long lists of books they thought should not be read by Germans. Then, on the night of May 10, 1933, Nazis raided libraries and bookstores across Germany. They marched by torchlight in nighttime parades, sang chants, and threw books into huge bonfires.

Schools also played an important role in spreading Nazi ideas. Newly written, were brought in to teach students blind obedience to the party, love for Hitler, and antisemitism. After-school meetings of the Hitler Youth and the League of German Girls trained children to be faithful to the Nazi party. In school and out, young people celebrated such occasions as Adolf Hitler's birthday and the anniversary of his taking power.

NAZI RACISM

For years before Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany, he was obsessed with ideas about race. In his speeches and writings, Hitler spread his beliefs in racial "purity" and in the superiority of the "Germanic race"—what he called an Aryan "master race." He pronounced that his race must remain pure in order to one day take over the world. For Hitler, the ideal "Aryan" was blond, blue-eyed, and tall.

When Hitler and the Nazis came to power, these beliefs became the government ideology and were spread in publicly displayed posters, on the radio, in movies, in classrooms, and in newspapers. The Nazis began to put their ideology into practice with the support of German scientists who believed that the human race could be improved by limiting the reproduction of people considered "inferior." Beginning in 1933, German physicians were allowed to perform forced sterilizations, operations making it impossible for the victims to have children. Among the targets of this public program were the Gypsies, an ethnic minority numbering about 30,000 in Germany, and handicapped individuals, including the mentally ill and people born deaf and blind. Also victimized were about 500 African-German children, the offspring of German mothers and African colonial soldiers in the Allied armies that occupied the German Rhineland region after World War I.

Hitler and other Nazi leaders viewed the Jews not as a religious group, but as a poisonous "race," which "lived off" the other races and weakened them. After Hitler took

power, Nazi teachers in school classrooms began to apply the "principles" of racial science. They measured skull size and nose length, and recorded the color of their pupils' hair and eyes to determine whether students belonged to the true "Aryan race." Jewish and Gypsy students were often humiliated in the process.

WORLD WAR II IN EUROPE

During World War II, Germany overran much of Europe using a new tactic called the "Blitzkrieg" (lightning war). Blitzkrieg involved the massing of planes, tanks, and artillery. These forces would break through enemy defenses along a narrow front. Air power prevented the enemy from closing the breach. German forces encircled opposing troops, forcing them to surrender.

Using the Blitzkrieg tactic, Germany defeated Poland in September 1939. They then took over the remainder of Western Europe. Yet Germany did not defeat Great Britain, which was protected from ground attack by the English Channel. German forces attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, pushing more than 600 miles to the gates of Moscow. A second German offensive in 1942 brought German soldiers to the shores of the Volga River and the city of Stalingrad. It was in Stalingrad that the German army was finally stopped in Russia.

But Germany still ruled most of Europe. In fact, Germany planned to annex most of the conquered eastern territories into a huge new Germany. While some areas were to serve as reservations for forced laborers, most were to be resettled by German colonists. These regions were ruthlessly exploited for the German war effort: the local people were drafted for forced labor in war industries or military construction projects. Millions more were deported to Germany to be used as forced laborers in German war industries or agriculture. As a final crime against the region, the Nazis began to use Eastern Europe as a place to build their terrible extermination camps – killing factories within which to murder Jews, Gypsies, Russians, and all the other people the Nazis regarded as inferior.