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The Story behind Hitler's Rise to Power

By Charles Hawley in Berlin

Wednesday marks the 75th anniversary of Adolf Hitler's attainment of power. It took the Führer just 12 years to plunge Europe into the darkest chapter of its history and unleash the Holocaust. But how did a failed painter manage to bring all of Germany under his dictatorial thumb?

It was a chilly winter day in 1933 when the German dictatorship began. Thermometers showed a temperature of minus 4 degrees Celsius -- the skies were clear. At about 10 a.m., Adolf Hitler, head of the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP), made his way down Wilhelmstrasse in the heart of Berlin.

The 44-year-old Hitler was on his way to the Reichskanzlei, seat of the Weimar Republic's government, where both he and his cabinet were to meet with President Paul von Hindenburg. A feeling of relief was in the air. For months, the German state had been limping from one failed government to the next, with three general elections having been held within 10 months. Hopes were high that the next government would provide some desperately needed stability. The swearing-in ceremony was set for 11 a.m.

Hindenburg, 85 years old at the time, spoke for just a few minutes, expressing his pleasure that all had finally managed to come together to form a coalition. Then he turned the floor over to Hitler, and nodded in appreciation as the new chancellor promised to uphold the constitution and govern for the good of the nation. It was Monday, Jan. 30, 1933 -- exactly 75 years ago -- and Hitler had finally reached his goal.

It was a moment Hitler had been working towards for years. Having joined the small German Workers Party in the autumn of 1919, the young World War I veteran -- originally from the Austrian border town of Braunau am Inn -- worked ceaselessly to transform the small group of conservative agitators into a national political force. Relying on a mix of nationalist demagoguery, vicious anti-Communism and virulent anti-Semitism -- topped off with an unceasing flood of invective aimed at the Treaty of Versailles -- Hitler rode a wave of street popularity he hoped would help him overthrow the Berlin government.

His first attempt, in November 1923, would fail in a hail of bullets in Munich -- the so-called Beer Hall Putsch. Yet even though the Weimar Republic -- the democratic regime which emerged out of Germany's post-World War I chaos -- managed to stabilize the country both politically and economically in the mid-1920s, Hitler's Nazis would get a second chance.

From today's perspective, it is tempting to pin the blame for Hitler's eventual rise to power on the great New York stock market crash of 1929, an event which put millions of German workers out of a job. Others point to the onerous conditions placed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles, which required Germany to accept responsibility for starting World War I and forced Berlin to pay 132 billion goldmarks in war reparations. Still others argue that Germany's history somehow made the country predestined for the kind of murderous dictatorship that Hitler's reign became.

Entire libraries have been filled with books attempting to explain how a once-homeless failed artist could have launched a war machine that eventually resulted in 60 million dead, and a death machine that killed 6 million in the Holocaust's gas chambers. More are certainly to come. The rise of the Nazis defies any simple narrative, coming as it did out of a myriad of interlacing events, ideologies and historical accidents.

One thing, however, is clear. Nazi Germany, and the flood of destruction it unleashed on Germany, Europe and the world, was far from inevitable.

The ill-fated Weimar Republic emerged from post-war chaos that verged on civil war. German soldiers, defeated on the battlefield, returned home only to be sent into skirmishes against communist revolutionaries. Right-wing monarchists and conservative anti-leftists in the military, judiciary and bureaucracy saw to it that little mercy was shown. Over 1,000 people were killed in the fighting, with Hitler's adopted home of Munich seeing a revolving door of bright red governments that only ended when a

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The NSDAP got most of its support in the July 1932 election in northern Germany.

local paramilitary force combined forces with a federal army unit to brutally put down the red threat. A number of future Nazis took part in the slaughter, and the political climate in Germany remained poisoned for years.

But stability remained elusive. The Weimar Republic's constitution made it almost inevitable that governments would have a short shelf life, and in the 14 years of the republic, fully 20 different governments would rule. But even still, the infant German democracy had a chance.

Exploiting Social Frustration

It was a brief window of hope. In 1924, Adolf Hitler was in jail for treason. On November 8, 1923, he and his rabble-rousing mob had descended on the Bürgerbräukeller beer hall, located just up a short rise from the Isar River in Munich. The city of Munich in the early 1920s was awash with right-wing political groups and swirling with intrigue -- rumours of an impending putsch abounded. Indeed, Hitler made his poorly planned move when he did because he thought other local leaders might be planning a revolution without him.

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Hitler visiting members of his NSDAP party in Munich.

Those local leaders were Bavarian Commissioner Gustav von Kahr, Bavarian State Police Chief Hans von Seisser and General Otto von Lossow -- and they were all gathered together in the beer hall that night. But despite Hitler arranging for his shock troops -- known to history as the SA -- to surround the building while he convinced the trio to join him, von Kahr, von Seisser and von Lossow were allowed to leave. They immediately began organizing forces to put down the Hitler putsch.

The decisive moment took place the next day. Having spent most of the night drinking their fill in the beer hall, with few ideas on how to make their rebellion a reality, Hitler and his supporters emerged into the morning of November 9, intent on parading through the streets of Munich to amass support. The parade, however, ended in a shootout, with 14 NSDAP members and four policemen killed. Hitler, jerked to the pavement hard enough to dislocate his shoulder, was later arrested hiding in the home of a friend in a small town south of Munich.

Massive public dissatisfaction with Germany's economy and political leadership had led to widespread support for Hitler prior to the putsch. Indeed, by the time he took to the streets for his planned march on Berlin (à la Mussolini in Italy), hyperinflation had devastated the economy, with one dollar buying billions of reichsmarks, the German currency of the time. The country was likewise reeling under the weight of World War I reparations payments, which France refused to renegotiate. The image of the Weimar Republic could not have been worse.

But when Hitler emerged from jail, after a scandalously short stay of just over a year, hyperinflation had been brought under control through the introduction of the new "rentenmark." In addition, the US had pressured the allies into accepting the Dawes Plan, which reduced Germany's Treaty of Versailles burden. The carpet of social frustration had been pulled out from under Hitler's feet. In May 1928 elections, the NSDAP only managed 2.6 percent of the vote nationwide.

From its very beginnings, however, the Weimar Republic seemed unlucky. Not only were Germans unused to democracy, with many pining for the predictable order of the monarchy, a number of those charismatic leaders who were deeply committed to popular rule, especially those from the Social Democrats, died before the going got rough. And just when things seemed to be improving, with German industry humming along at levels not seen since prior to World War I, the floor dropped out of the US economy. With the Americans immediately calling in foreign loans, the German economy also quickly ran into trouble, and by the beginning of 1930, 15 percent of all German workers were unemployed. That number would soon double.

Given the paltry size to which the Nazis had shrunk, it comes as something of a surprise that Hitler was still around to benefit from the Depression at all: Thousands had jumped the NSDAP ship during the late 1920s and party coffers were empty. But Hitler and his cronies had not been wasting their time, and by

the end of the decade the NSDAP was well organized and -- though small -- was no longer just a fringe party in Munich. Indeed, during the worst of the economic crisis, the Nazis even handed out propaganda at job centers and set up soup kitchens to feed the hungry.

And Hitler continued hammering away at his favorite issues. The Jews were to be blamed for Germany's plight, he said, as were the leftists. In fact, the Weimar Republic itself was nothing but a Jewish-leftist conspiracy of destruction. And he, Adolf Hitler, would save the nation.

Wary of Democracy

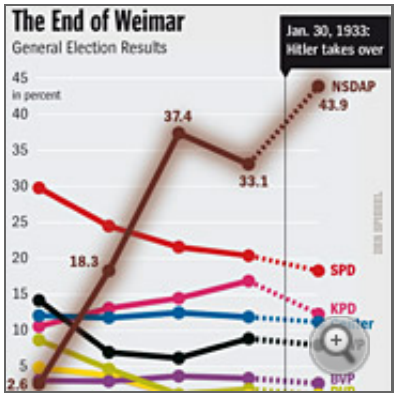
There is no denying that Hitler was a gifted speaker. But without the fatal weaknesses in Germany's political leadership, it is difficult to see how he would have made it to the top. President von Hindenburg had never been terribly convinced that democracy was the way to go. Indeed, the World War I hero and his supporters had long yearned for a strong leader free from parliamentary meddling -- and they were especially wary of the Social Democrats, the one party that had thrown all of its support behind the Weimar democracy from the beginning.

Von Hindenburg's skepticism of parliamentary democracy was shared by many in German society, especially in heavy industry and among the country's powerful farming sector. It came as no surprise when, the SPD government of Chancellor Hermann Müller having collapsed, von Hindenburg appointed nationalist Heinrich Brüning in his place in March 1930. The left side of the political spectrum was in no shape to prevent it -- the communists seemed just as eager to see the end of Weimar as the radical right was. The dangers to German democracy were mounting.

Soon thereafter, it became dramatically clear that the Nazis had recovered. When Brüning stepped in, he was handed far-reaching emergency powers -- and when parliament complained, von Hindenburg dismissed it and called for new elections on Sept. 14, 1930. Hitler's NSDAP, until then a tiny splinter party on the national political stage, raked in 18.3 percent of the vote.

Governmental stability, however, was still a long way off. The ensuing two years saw prime ministers come and go, seemingly at the whim of the aging president. Meanwhile, the numbers of Germans without a job continued to rise -- to over 8 million -- and the government in Berlin did little about it. Indeed, instead of trying to stimulate the moribund economy, von Hindenburg continued on a path of strict savings, partially to demonstrate to the Allies that Germany was simply too poor to pay World War I reparations. When elections were finally held again in July 1932, the Nazis got a whopping 37.4 percent of the vote.

Another way to see the results, however, is that 63.6 percent of Germans didn't cast their ballots for the NSDAP. Indeed, despite Hitler's party getting support from across the country and from a variety of different segments of society, his was still largely a protest vote -- and it would only last as long as there was something to protest. But the Depression was showing signs of bottoming out. General elections held in November that same year showed a drop in support for the Nazis to 33.1 percent. Even worse for the NSDAP, President von Hindenburg still seemed disinclined to hand over power to Hitler, even though the NSDAP had received far more votes than any other party. He said that naming Hitler chancellor was "neither compatible with his conscience nor with his obligation to the Fatherland."



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Hitler's NSDAP won a series of elections.

It was a potentially disastrous time for the Nazis. Support was waning and being left out of government meant that, despite election success, the party had no way to reward its most ardent followers. "We are all very depressed, especially given the danger that the party might break up and our work will have been in vain," noted Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Party propaganda guru.

Help came from an unexpected quarter. Franz von Papen, who had already had his turn on the chancellor merry-go-round in June, wanted a second chance and beseeched von Hindenburg to give his backing to a coalition of Hitler's Nazis, independent conservatives, and the arch-nationalists from the DNVP. Other von Hindenburg advisors likewise pleaded for the solution, arguing that, by hemming Hitler in among those who had long been in Germany's political elite, they would be able to control the wannabe dictator. In January 1933, von Hindenburg gave in.

Absolute Power

Hitler had made it -- but he was still far from the dictator he would become. Indeed, his first government only included two ministers from the NSDAP, Hermann Göring as minister without portfolio and Wilhelm Frick as interior minister. But he wanted more; priority number one for his new government was the dissolution of the Reichstag and, yet again, new elections. His goal was clear, and it was one shared by much of the country's political elite: Once the Nazis and their allies had a majority, the Reichstag was to hand over power to the chancellor. In short, Hitler wanted parliament to vote itself out of existence.

Once again, luck seemed to be on Hitler's side. On February 27, less than a week before the new elections, the Reichstag, Germany's parliament building, was set ablaze. The blame was pinned on Dutch bricklayer Marinus van der Lubbe, and indeed, after decades of research into the incident, no convincing proof has been unearthed to show that he wasn't acting alone. But Hitler, Göring and Goebbels knew a propaganda godsend when they saw one. "If this fire, as I believe, is the work of the Communists, then we need to crush this murderous plague with an iron fist," Hitler told his vice chancellor, von Papen.

And crush they did. The day after the fire, the "decree for the protection of people and the state" went into effect, allowing Hitler's Nazis to go after their political enemies with gusto. It was the wave of arrests set off by the Reichstag fire that ultimately made the rapid construction of prisons necessary. Many of those prisons would later become concentration camps.

On election day in 1933 -- the last halfway free elections to take place in unified Germany until 1990 -- the Nazis won 43.9 percent of the vote.

The result still wasn’t enough for the party to control its own destiny. But by then, it was already too late to matter. When the fateful parliamentary session was called to order on March 23, 1933 at just after 2 p.m., fully 107 representatives from the Social Democrats and the Communists were missing. Many of them were behind bars, while others were too afraid to show up or had already disappeared into exile. Just to be on the safe side, the parliamentary president Hermann Göring elected not even to acknowledge the 81 seats controlled by the Communists, significantly reducing the number of parliamentary votes available to the opposition.

At 6:16 p.m., SPD leader Otto Wels stepped to the microphone. It was to be the final public defense of democracy in Germany before the country started down the path of genocide, war and ruin. Not long after Wels finished, and following an enraged speech by Hitler, 444 representatives voted for parliament to be stripped of power. There were just 94 votes against.

The Nazis wasted no time. On April 1, they organized a nationwide boycott of Jewish shops, doctors and lawyers. On April 25, the share of Jewish university students was set at 1.5 percent. On May 2, Germany's powerful labor unions were outlawed. On May 10, students in numerous cities across Germany joined together in an orgy of book burning, doing away with volumes disapproved of by the Nazis. On June 23, the SPD was banned.

But the final important date in Hitler's rise to complete dictatorial power came only in the summer of 1934. On August 2, President Paul von Hindenburg passed away. In the days preceding the old man's death, Hitler signed a decree abolishing the position of president. In its place, another was created: "Führer and Chancellor." Finally, all power in Germany was united in his hands.

Sixty-one months later, Germany invaded Poland. Soon thereafter, the Holocaust began. The result? Sixty million dead and a continent destroyed.

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