

NAZI PATH TO POWER

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"The rise to power of Hitler's Nazi Party was a result of the Weimar Republic's weak government and the problems it faced."

It seems as though that right from its beginnings the Weimar Republic was doomed to disaster. It faced many of Germany's problems, including the harsh punishments of the Versailles Treaty, enormous reparations, super inflation and the Great Depression, in addition to trying to maintain a stable democratic government that many Germans were unsatisfied with. The rise to power of Hitler's Nazi Party was a result of the Weimar Republic's weak government and the problems it faced.

Before World War I, Germany had been a monarchy. The emperor abdicated at the end of the war, and in 1918, Germany was left without a stable government, facing revolution and disorder. Moderate men were able to form a parliamentary system of government. The new political system had no king or emperor. Led by the three pro-republican parties and ratified by the German people in 1919, it first met in the town of Weimar. The liberal Weimar constitution was an attempt to replace the autocracy of Kaiser Wilhelm II and his rubber stamp wartime parliament with democratic representation. True stability of government was virtually impossible to attain as each government formed was, of necessity, a coalition of two or more political parties because no one party could gain an absolute majority. Grunberger (1964) feels that

"From the very beginning democracy in the Weimar Republic laboured under an enormous handicap: it had been introduced in the hour of defeat, not by the will of the German people, but in order to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of the Kaiser's government with an arrangement acceptable to the victorious allies".

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The rise to power of Hitler's Nazi party was a result of the Weimar Republic's weak government and the problems it faced as clearly a new constitution could not instil democratic habits overnight in a people whose experience for centuries had been the least democratic of any industrialised nation. They instead turned towards resentful rejection of the system under which they lived, leaving Hitler to later appear as saviour of the German people.

Although Germany was not consulted, the Treaty of Versailles (June 1919) set out the terms of peace for Germany. Germany had already surrendered all of its guns, its planes, submarines and naval vessels at the time of the armistice. The treaty limited its army to 100 000 men, the Rhineland was to be occupied by Allie troops for fifteen years and was to remain in a demilitarised condition and Germany was to relinquish all its overseas investments and surrender all its overseas colonies, in addition to many other territorial, military and economic settlements. Yet, the most humiliating aspect of the treaty was the War-Guilt Clause which stated that Germany accept the responsibility for all the loss and damage caused by the war. Grunberger (1964) found that

"To most Germans these terms appeared not merely vindictive but unjust in the extreme, a travesty of peace and an attempt to saddle Germany with the consequences of a war guilt which they did not accept".

Many Germans felt that they had not lost the war and despised the Weimar government for accepting the terms of the Versailles Treaty.

The rise to power of Hitler's Nazi Party was a result of the Weimar Republic's weak government and the problems it faced, as Hitler used the Treaty of Versailles and its harsh punishments as accepted by the Weimar government as a target of Nazi hatred. He spoke of defiance of the Allies, who had imposed the humiliating treaty and he promised to redress the errors of the 'November criminals' (the republican leaders who had accepted the treaty) who had disgraced the nation. He preached that Germany had been 'stabbed in the back', but would rise again to greatness.

During the 1920's, the governments of the Weimar Republic struggled to meet the huge reparations payments. Their failure in doing so led to the French occupation of the Ruhr region in 1923 - another humiliating blow to German pride. The Weimar governments then resorted to a policy of deliberate inflation, enabling them to make payments to the Allies in the devalued currency. However, the German people saw their savings and investments rendered worthless. This policy bred further dislike for the democratic government and more resentment of the Allies who were blamed for the disaster. It is believed (Browne, 1969) that

"Such was the origin of the inflationary avalanche which was to crash down in 1923, speeded on its way by a government bent on avoiding reparation-payments Buried beneath it were the life savings of millions of middle-class people, small investors and shopkeepers This wiping out of bank balances, obscured by the short-lived boom between 1924 and 1929, was to contribute disastrously to the whole country's eventual loss of political balance".

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"The developments of the post-war period were such that many Germans increasingly felt the need of compensating for their own diminished sense of self-importance, on account of defeat in war, or peace-time loss of status through inflation, etc, by identifying themselves with a great figure or commanding cause".

Many looked to the Nazi party for an answer, as the Weimar government had failed to help. Hitler offered the influential middle-class a new start, a healthy economy and protection from their enemies, but without any specific guarantees.

When the Great Depression struck in 1929, American loans dried up, the German economy collapsed, many Germans were unemployed and large sections of the German business community which had just recovered from inflation in 1923, now faced ruin again. Cowie (1992) has found that

"By 1932 there were 6 million unemployed, and the nation was seething with discontent and a sense of desperation The extremity of the depression revived commitments to political extremism".

Many turned once again in faith to Marxian socialism, hoping to get a fair distribution of wealth through the violent overthrow of capitalism, while others believed they needed a strong leader to return the country to strength and wealth.

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"To many Germans the failure of traditional parties was disastrously clear. The time had now come for a change".

Hitler offered the workers job security and the unemployed new jobs. He offered to protect the great landholders from 'Socialists' who might remove privilege or even make a redistribution of land, and would once again make the large industrialists 'masters in their own houses'. In desperate times, Hitler was even able to take this 'catch-all' appeal to the international field where he posed as the bulwark of Western Europe against communism. In addition, Hitler generated emotional zeal and hatred for 'inferior races' by 'identifying' the Jews as responsible for the Great Depression and the unemployment of the German workers. The rise to power of Hitler's Nazi Party was a result of the Weimar Republic's weak government and the problems it faced, as Hitler and his party were able to use the Great Depression to their advantage.

The rise to power of Hitler's Nazi Party was clearly a result of the Weimar Republic's weak government and the problems it faced. That the party had resolved the problems with which the democratic government was powerless to cope, such as the harsh punishments of the Versailles Treaty, enormous reparations, super inflation and the Great Depression, and that they transformed the Weimar Republic into an economically and politically powerful state is a matter of record. Equally of record is the fact that the cost of that transformation included the holocaust of World War II, the bloodiest and most destructive conflict in human history, from which Germany emerged beaten, divided and impoverished.

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