

# Hitler's rise to power



*Adolf Hitler*

## Hitler's character

The most notorious of all the dictators was Adolf Hitler. Although he became dictator of Germany (from 1933 to 1945), he was, in fact, born in 1889 in Austria. He failed in his ambition to become an architect. However, he served bravely in the First World War. Then after the war, he became involved in politics with discontented demobilised soldiers.

Hitler was by no means an imposing figure to look at. He was of

medium height and had a funny little black moustache. How then did he become so powerful? He had tremendous will-power, a most powerful personality, almost hypnotic eyes and a most fearful temper. Important men like generals or ministers would enter Hitler's room determined to make him change his mind; they would emerge either utterly convinced that they were wrong or frightened into quivering jellies!

Hitler had just as much power over huge crowds as over individ-

uals. Someone who bitterly disliked him, nevertheless recognised his brilliance as a speaker: when he spoke, so Otto Strasser wrote,

as the spirit moves him, he is promptly transformed into one of the greatest speakers of the century. Adolf Hitler enters a hall. He sniffs the air. For a minute he gropes, feels his way, senses the atmosphere. Suddenly he bursts forth. His words go like an arrow to their target, he touches each private wound on the raw, liberating the mass unconscious, expressing its innermost aspirations, telling it what it most wants to hear.

Crowds, sometimes of hundreds of thousands, would roar their support, rather like an excited football crowd when a particularly fine goal is scored. They would stand up and chant, 'Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer!' that is, 'One state, one people, one leader!' Hitler took the title of 'Führer' or leader of his country. (Compare the title Mussolini gave himself.)

## The weakness of the Weimar Republic

However, it took Hitler many years of planning and struggle before he became Führer. The system of government set up in Germany after the First World War was called the Weimar Republic. Its governments were weak and they had huge problems to cope with. The three most serious difficulties were these.

### Inflation

This means the rise of prices and therefore a drop in the value of money. We have suffered from this problem in Britain in recent years—but not as disastrously as Germany in 1923. In 1921 the British pound sterling was worth 500 marks. By

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A kite made from worthless German banknotes, 1923

the end of 1923 its value was 16,000,000,000,000 marks! There are many stories about how worthless German banknotes became. People had to take bags full of notes when they went shopping. A woman left a shopping basket heaped with money outside a shop and when she went to fetch it the basket had been stolen but the less valuable banknotes had been left behind! All this may sound amusing until you realise that people's savings were made utterly worthless in this way.

## Unemployment

This was a particularly serious problem in the early 1930s. As you can see from Figure 2 the numbers shot up from 3 million in 1930 to well over 5 million in 1932.

## Lack of confidence in the government

The government seemed unable to cope. People tended to vote for other parties in the hope that they would make things better. One of the parties to benefit was Hitler's Nazi Party.

The success of the Nazis was due to the following:

- 1 The economic depression and discontent with the government of the Centre parties (see p. 42).
- 2 Very careful organisation of the

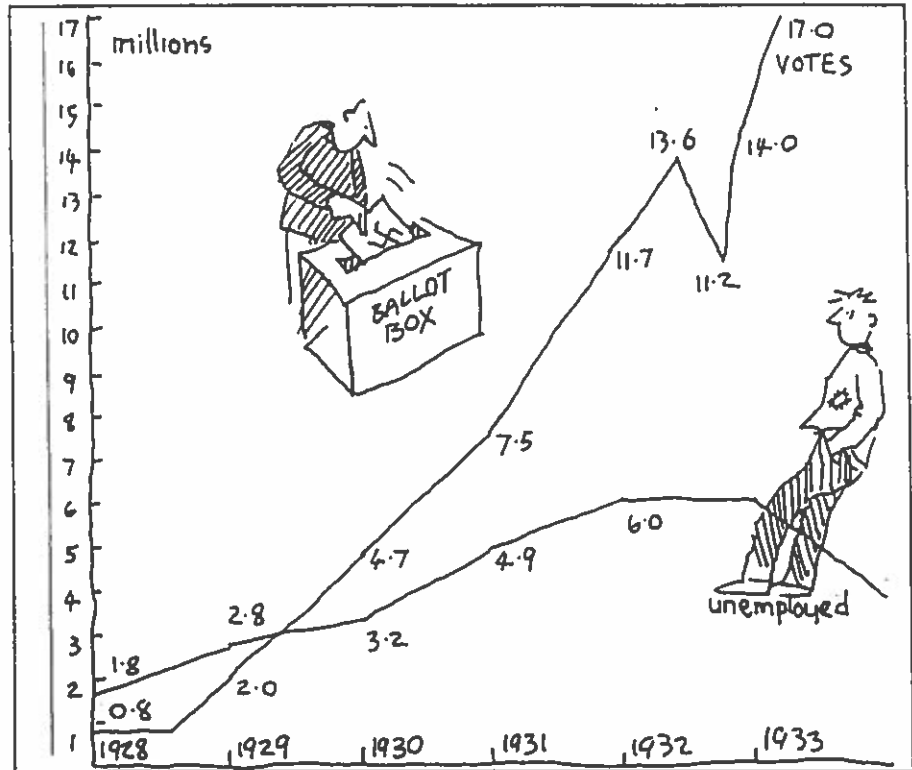


Figure 2 The relationship between unemployment and votes for the Nazis

Nazi Party and tireless campaigning.

3 Fear of Communism, especially among businessmen. Many donated money to the Nazis.

4 They took advantage of the resentment felt for the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.

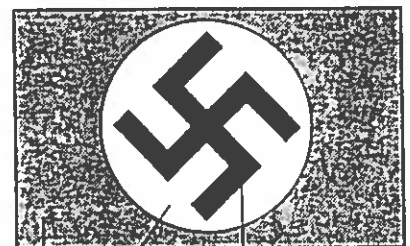
Look at Figure 2 again. Consider whether Hitler would have been so successful if the German people had been happier.

## Hitler's early struggle for power

### The Munich putsch

The story of Hitler's rise to power really starts in 1923. By that year he had become a leading member of the small National Socialist German Workers Party (Nazi for short). Like the Italian Fascists they had their own private army of strong-arm men, the S.A. or 'Brownshirts'.

The main strength of the party was in Bavaria. In November 1923 Hitler and other Nazi leaders in Munich (the capital of Bavaria) organised a demonstration in an attempt to take over the government. The German word for such a violent seizing of power is 'putsch'. A rather pathetic group, carrying their new flag, marched from a beer-hall through the streets of Munich. They were quickly dispersed and the leaders, including Hitler, were arrested.



Blood red White circle Black crooked cross or swastika

Figure 3 The Swastika flag

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## Mein Kampf

Hitler was imprisoned in Landsberg Castle. Here he wrote his book *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle). It is a long, rambling book about Germany, history, race, and is partly autobiographical. Here is a typical extract:

For myself and all other true National-Socialists there is only one doctrine: Nation and Fatherland.

What we have to fight for is security for the existence and increase of our race and our nation, nourishment of its children and purity of its blood, freedom and independence for the Fatherland, and that our nation may be able to ripen for the fulfilment of the mission appointed for them by the Creator of the Universe.

## Strengthening of the party

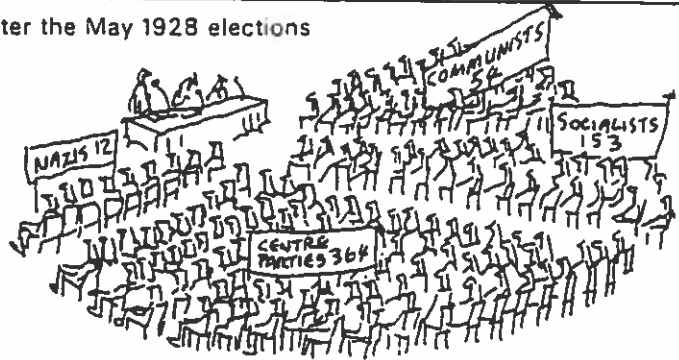
The lesson Hitler learned from the failure of the Munich putsch was to proceed very carefully. From now on he would concentrate on the legal path to power—by strengthening the party in the country and increasing its number of seats in the Reichstag (the German parliament). You can see from Diagram 2 how quickly the Nazis increased their power.

## Hitler secures power, 1932–34

### Hitler becomes Chancellor

As you can see from Diagram 2 the Nazis were the largest single party in the Reichstag in November 1932, though they did not have a majority over all the other parties combined. Hitler demanded that he should be made Chancellor (that is, prime minister). Field Marshal Hindenburg, the aged President, refused the suggestion with contempt. But the government of Von Papen was weak with both the Communists and Nazis in opposition. A new Chan-

Reichstag after the May 1928 elections



Reichstag after the November 1932 elections

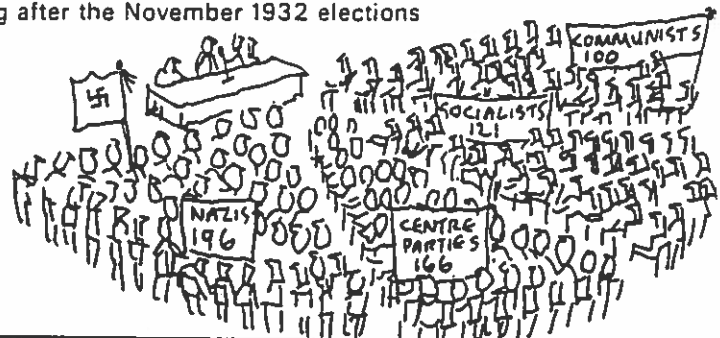


Figure 4 Nazi seats in the Reichstag

cellor, Von Schleicher, was appointed, but his government was no stronger. Eventually, on 30 January 1933 the President was forced to ask Hitler to be Chancellor. Cheering crowds thronged Berlin that night.

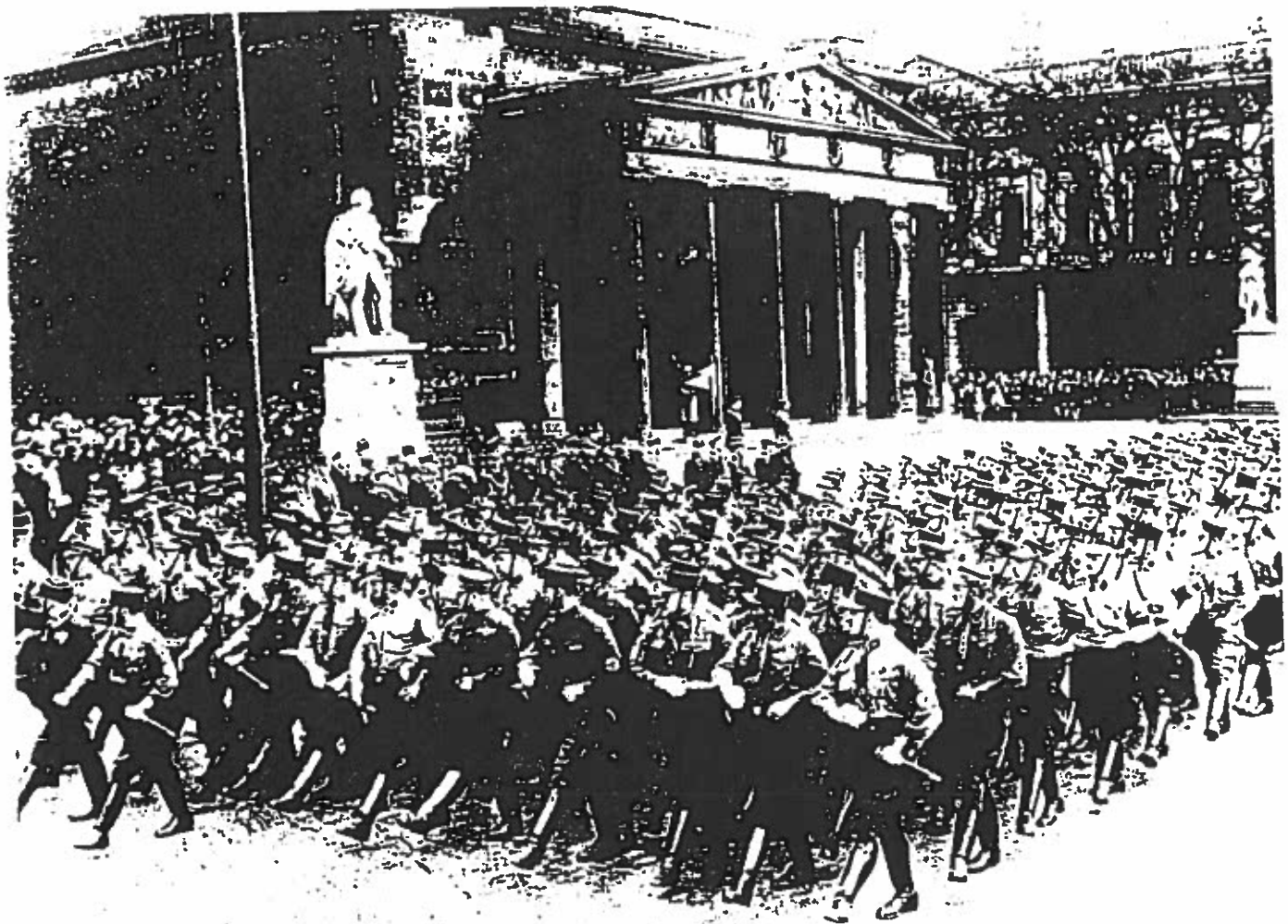
President Hindenburg



## The Reichstag fire

The most serious immediate threat to Hitler was the strong Communist Party. On the night of 27 February 1933 the Reichstag building was gutted by fire. A young Dutch Communist, van der Lubbe, was arrested and found guilty of starting the blaze. The next month, elections were held and the Nazis secured a majority in the Reichstag by declaring the Communist Party illegal because of their supposed plots. But were the Communists really guilty? The fire and the arrest of van der Lubbe were so convenient to the Nazis that it has even been suggested that the Nazis set the building ablaze themselves in a scheme to discredit the Communists.

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*A parade of brownshirts*

## **The Enabling Law**

Hitler immediately made the Reichstag pass an 'Enabling Law' which gave him enormous powers. He had made a start to becoming dictator. He then used these powers to destroy the independence of the trade unions and make all other political parties, apart from the Nazis, illegal.

## **The Night of the Long Knives**

But Hitler could not feel that he had complete control unless he had control of the army and the S.A. We saw on page 46 how the Nazi Party had organised its own private army of brownshirted 'Stormtroopers' (S.A.). By 1934 there were about

two million of these men, commanded by Ernst Röhm. Hitler decided to destroy this threat to his personal power. He had already created his own black-shirted guard of S.S. (Schutz-Staffen). At 3 o'clock in the morning of 30 June members of the S.S. visited the S.A. leaders and shot them dead. Later, Hitler presented the murderers with ceremonial daggers as a reward for their bloodthirsty work on the 'night of the long knives'.

## **Hitler—Führer**

The next month President Hindenburg died. Hitler immediately took over the powers of the president and

took the title of Führer (Leader). He also required the army to take a new oath of allegiance:

I will render unconditional obedience to the Führer, Adolf Hitler, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, and will be ready as a brave soldier to stake my life at any time for this oath.

Hitler was now complete dictator of Germany, now called the Third Reich (The first had been the Holy Roman Empire and the second, the Empire created by Bismarck).