

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHY DID HITLER COME TO POWER?

The rise of the Nazi Party and the factors which brought Adolf Hitler to power in January 1933 have been the subject of intense historical debate. Most studies that have examined the collapse of democracy in Germany and the rise of Nazism nearly always concentrate on the following factors: the vulnerability of the Weimar constitution; the problems created by the imposition of the 'hated' Treaty of Versailles; the deep economic problems that beset Germany, most notably the 'great inflation' and the economic slump of the early 1930s; the lack of a democratic consensus; the existence of extreme parties of the left and right who desired the overthrow of democracy; and the presence of leading figures in the army, civil service and within industry who were equally indifferent to the survival of the infant republic.

With such a vast list of seemingly insoluble problems, and given its inherent flaws, it is surprising the Weimar Republic lasted as long as it did. Yet we must not forget that it lasted longer than the Third Reich. All of the difficulties that faced Weimar democracy did not occur at one and the same time. In fact, the period 1919-23 was extremely turbulent. It could even be said that the Weimar Republic was more politically and economically unstable in that period than at any other time. But democracy survived. The period between 1924 and 1929 was one of relative economic stability, and democratic rule was never once seriously threatened. Even in the period 1929-33, when unemployment rose, Germany suffered severe economic difficulties, but there was no attempt made by any group on either the right or left to bring about an overthrow of the republic by force. It must be remembered that high unemployment, the major consequence of the depression, was higher in percentage terms in the USA and various other European countries, which did not develop fascist regimes, than in Germany, and the view that the depression brought Hitler to power is not credible, as most of the unemployed voted communist, not Nazi. When democracy collapsed, it was destroyed by a conspiracy between the power holders in government and parties of the extreme right. The decisive new

ingredients in the period 1929-33 were the supreme indifference of Hindenburg and his inner circle to sustain democracy, and the growth in support for Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. It was the mixture of these two factors, operating at a time of economic depression, that ensured the collapse of Weimar democracy and the creation of the Third Reich.

Some historians suggest the primary blame for the destruction of democracy in Germany rests with the authoritarian right who brought the unpredictable Adolf Hitler to power in the hope that he could be tamed and used to serve their own authoritarian, though somewhat less extreme, ends. Hitler's appointment came at the end of a crisis in the party-political state in Germany which began in 1930 with the appointment of Brüning. In truth, Hindenburg's actions in using Article 48 to sustain unrepresentative right-wing leaders and governments from 1930 onwards mortally damaged the infant democratic structure in Weimar Germany and ensured the country would have some type of authoritarian government during the 1930s. According to Alan Bullock, Hitler was 'jobbed into office' during a period when the electoral popularity of the Nazi Party was on the wane. On this view, Hitler's 'seizure of power' came about because the structure of democracy in Weimar Germany was reliant on reactionary forces at a critical juncture, and they decided to destroy it, hiring Hitler and the Nazi Party in a cloak-and-dagger fashion to do their dirty work (Bullock, 1962). Other writers have viewed Hitler as the unwitting agent of the bourgeoisie, chosen to serve the same function as Napoleon had done for the French bourgeoisie over a century earlier. For Gorgi Dimitroff, Nazism was the 'open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinist, and most imperial elements of finance capital' (Kershaw, 2000: 12).

The major problem with viewing Hitler as a mere agent of the upper classes, or as the puppet of big business, is that it underestimates the role of Hitler's own personality and the political skills he exerted on events at a particular place and time, and consigns National Socialism to a historical blind alley. The desire to see the 'German tragedy' as some sort of tragic accident, or an upper-class cloak-and-dagger conspiracy gone wrong, is not surprising, given the barbarity and criminality connected with the Nazi regime and the obvious dangers of turning Hitler into some present-day hero. As Wolfgang Saur puts it: 'In Nazism the historian faces a phenomenon that leaves him [her] no way but rejection' (Kershaw, 2000: 17). At the same time, a historian is expected to show 'sympathetic understanding' when approaching any historical subject, something which is extremely difficult when that subject is the rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party.

Yet we must not forget that, at precisely the same time as democracy was being undermined in Germany, the popularity of Hitler and the Nazi Party in democratic elections was increasing at a quite incredible rate. After 1929, *Hitler was the single most dynamic politician in Germany and the most*

popular leader on the centre right. Nazism saw the support of million Germans over voting age in July 1932, and of many young Germans who did not yet have the right to vote. In recent years, new research on voting behaviour has shown that the Nazi Party was not purely and simply a party of middle-class resentment, but drew support from a broader range of class groupings than any other German party. It seems the most powerful reason why these diverse groups supported Nazism was not primarily because of its opposition to the Treaty of Versailles or its anti-Semitism, but because of its utopian promise to end class-based politics and replace them with a popular, ethnically united folk community. A great part of this appeal, especially to the middle classes, but also to working-class supporters of Nazism, was a desire to weaken the power of Marxism in Germany, and to put an end to democratic government. Hitler appealed to many Germans before 1933 because he promised to achieve social harmony by the creative destruction of those groups in German society who he claimed were opponents of his vision of an ethnically united folk community.

In spite of the dangers of stressing the 'uniqueness' of Nazism and the 'peculiarities' of German history, it remains difficult to reject the view that there were certain unique aspects of German politics, culture and society in the aftermath of the crisis of the defeat in the First World War which did allow nationalism to flourish in a very distinctive manner in Germany. The dramatic changes that defeat brought about in Germany did produce feelings of isolation, frustration, insecurity, anger, which greatly affected the middle-class groups that gave support to Nazism. At the same time, it must be appreciated that the growth of mass industrial society, accompanied by the social changes brought about by the First World War, affected all of European society, and made the establishment of stable democracies very difficult to achieve anywhere, especially in countries without democratic traditions. There were many within the landed and the middle classes in Germany who disliked the class struggle championed by socialists and Marxists, and felt democracy was not strong enough to end this struggle. It is perhaps significant that the most stable European democracy in the inter-war period, Britain, which had been on the winning side in the war, remained relatively free of both fascism and Marxism, while two of the newest democracies in Europe, Italy and Germany, both collapsed and established right-wing authoritarian regimes that decided to escape from the freedom of democracy into what seemed the more simple structure of a nationalist dictatorship.

It is difficult to decide whether the rise of the Nazi Party was the public expression of an irrational and incomprehensible resistance to modernisation (an 'escape from freedom'), or a specific German response to the creation of a modern democracy in a society without a long democratic tradition. It is worth noting that many of the hard-core supporters of

Nazism were also among the strongest opponents of Marxism, and were more often than not 'losers' in the drive towards modernity. This was especially true of the people in small towns and rural areas who supported the Nazi Party, but it was also true of many of the other supporters of the party in urban areas. Detlev Penkert argued the rise of the Nazi Party combined traditional 'conservative' values, such as the promise to restore an authoritarian system of government and a return to the land, with a desire to use modern techniques in industry for the good of the 'nation' through rearmament and more efficient use of industrial resources (Fischer, 1995: 123).

For George Mosse, Nazism was a unique revolution of the right with goals of its own, and was not a mere opportunistic movement led by a power-crazed individual without clear ideological objectives (Mosse, 1966). According to Roger Griffin, Nazism was not the agent of any other force, or the reflection of one single class, but the product of the conditions that existed in countries with powerful nationalist forces and limited experience of democratic traditions. It was not merely an attempt to stop modernisation by simply 'turning back the clock', but offered to use a combination of modern ideas and traditional values to create a new utopia, a genuine third way between liberal democracy and socialism. Ian Kershaw has recently suggested that research on the social basis of Nazi electoral support before 1933 strongly indicates it was the dynamic and radical aspects of the Nazi programme and its support for 'modernisation' in some areas of policy that attracted as many voters as the backward-looking, often anti-scientific, negative and reactionary aspects of its election campaigns (Kershaw, 2000). Hitler never supported the desire of some radicals in the party for de-industrialisation. It must also be emphasised that the whole idea of *Lebensraum* put a high priority on exploiting raw materials and agricultural resources using modern industrial techniques. The Holocaust would do much the same. It was indeed a Nazi dream that the new Germany would combine strong industrial and agricultural sectors. The idea of creating an ethnically united new nation with unlimited freedom from international control was also a very modern idea. In fact, the Nazis promised to modernise warfare and, ultimately, genocide.

Hitler offered a utopian vision at a time of deep gloom and pessimism. He promised a new cult of leadership, a racial revolution, a utopian folk community, a new kind of racial imperialism which would make Germany the dominant power in Europe, and the end of class conflict and of all Jewish influence. Hitler may have collaborated with existing elites to achieve power, but he always promised voters that if he came to power he would create a new Germany. Even though Hitler's proposed utopia was, like all others, unrealisable, it was comforting to certain sections of German society to think about living in such a seemingly conflict-free society at a time when

their society appeared conflict-ridden. Hitler also stressed that Germany's economic problems stemmed from military defeat and foreign and 'Jewish' exploitation, and that these could be solved by a vigorous Nazi dedication to restore German economic and military power.

The reason why Nazism was able to attract so many Germans after 1929 was due to the fact that democratic government, a relatively new phenomenon in Germany, was viewed with great indifference by many millions of Germans, and because the Nazi Party offered a new and appealing utopian vision. This helps to explain why Hitler was able to attract nearly 12 million Germans within a democratic system to a party dedicated to destroying that system. Another factor which unquestionably attracted voters to the Nazi Party was the existence of a genuine 'revolutionary' threat from the communist left. The KPD was as dedicated to the destruction of democracy in Germany as were the Nazis, though the KPD wanted to replace it with a communist regime. Hitler played up the 'Red menace' very strongly and presented the Nazi Party as the best insurance against a communist revolution. Many groups in German society – and they were not just capitalist businessmen or members of the reactionary 'old gang' – viewed socialism as one of the chief sources of division in Germany, and the creative destruction of socialism, which Hitler promised, was an attractive proposition during the period when Nazi popularity grew and eventually proved attractive to the power brokers who ran Germany.

What Hitler offered, above all – and this was especially important at a time of severe political tension and economic depression – was the promise of strong, clear leadership based on authoritarian principles. Many millions of Germans who turned to the Nazis did so because they found the idea of a strong leader extremely attractive. Adolf Hitler was a charismatic public speaker who moved those who heard him speak with a passion which many describe in religious terms. To deny that Hitler had this power is to fail to understand the mood in Germany during the early 1930s [Doc. 18]. We may not be able to comprehend Hitler's power to inspire at this place and time, and, given what came later, we may not wish to believe it ever existed. Yet to deny it existed, or to dismiss Hitler's seductive power to rouse many millions of 'ordinary' Germans, is a dereliction of analytical objectivity, and it amounts to bland fence-sitting by those who continue to dismiss Hitler's political and oratorical ability. Whatever it was about this ordinary-looking individual, he was able to inspire other ordinary individuals to feel his anger and to share his visionary dream, no matter how repulsive that dream may now appear with the benefit of hindsight and the knowledge of the gas ovens.

Hitler was faced at every turn during the early 1930s by weak and vacillating opponents. For the authoritarian right, Hitler was the only politician close enough to many of their own views who, with the aid of the

mass media, stood any chance of taking his enormous body of existing supporters and establishing the popular authoritarian regime they desired. The only alternatives to Hitler coming to power were a presidential dictatorship led by Hindenburg, a return to parliamentary coalitions of the centre left, a communist revolution, or the continuation of unpopular civilian politicians ruling with the consent of Hindenburg. Of these options, the only one Hindenburg considered was to continue with an authoritarian regime led by a politician he controlled. The only other alternative was a communist revolution, but the communists were not well armed enough, nor popular enough, to have defeated the armed forces and established a viable government.

In the end, Hindenburg accepted a logic that had been pressed upon him by many leading figures in his entourage ever since 1930, namely, that Hitler should be brought into government, hopefully shackled, controlled, and then utilised to serve the old guard. This was, of course, a monumental error of political judgement, as Hitler had always proclaimed both publicly and privately his determination, if he came to power legally, to destroy the constitution and set up a dictatorship. Whether such an incredible force as Adolf Hitler would have just disappeared from the scene had Hindenburg not brought him to power in January 1933 appears extremely unlikely. Of course, Hitler might have abandoned the 'legal path to power' and returned to the streets armed with the full knowledge that the army was keen to deal with the 'communist menace' and wanted unlimited funds for rearmament. The only viable popular leader for an authoritarian, militaristic regime, which Germany's political, business and military rulers all wanted, was Adolf Hitler, and it would have been a miracle, given the nature of German politics in early 1933, if he had not come to power.