CHAPTER 32

Germany from Weimar to Hitler

TIME LINE

1918	Emperor William I1 abdicates; a German republic is established
1919	The National Assembly adopts the Weimar Constitution
1923	French and Belgian troops occupy the Ruhr valley
	Germany experiences a catastrophic inflation
	The Beer Hall Putsch, led by Hitler and Ludendorff, fails
1924	The adoption of the Dawes Plan ends the Ruhr crisis
1925	Germany, France, Great Britain, and Italy sign the Locarno Pact
	Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg wins the German presidential election
1926	Germany enters the League of Nations
1929	The Young Plan eases Germany's reparations burden
1930	The Reichstag election results in the Nazis becoming Germany's second-largest party
1932	Hindenburg defeats Hitler in the presidential election
	The July Reichstag election results in the Nazis becoming Germany's largest party
1933	Hitler becomes chancellor
	The Nazi Party becomes Germany's only legal political party
1934	A purge eliminates Hitler's opponents within the Nazi Party
	President Hindenburg dies; Hitler assumes the powers of the presidency
1935	The Nuremberg Laws deprive Germany's Jews of their rights as citizens

During the early 1920s, the new German republic survived threats from both the left and the right, as well as a catastrophic inflation. Later in the decade, however, the Weimar Republic began to enjoy a degree of political stability, as well as economic prosperity.

The Great Depression of the early 1930s proved the Weimar Republic's undoing. As the German economy spiraled downward, the Nazi leader Adolf Hitler won increasing support. In January 1933, Hitler became Germany's chancellor, and he moved quickly to establish his dictatorship. Opposition political parties were eliminated. the free trade unions were abolished. and Germany

became a police state. Hitler also began a campaign to eliminate Germany's Jews from any significant role in national life.

Postwar Germany

On November 9, 1918, two days before the signing of the armistice, Emperor William II (r. 1888-1918) abdicated. The leaders of the Majority Social Democrats, the country's largest political party, proclaimed the establishment of a republic. Friedrich Eben (18711925) took office as chancellor, heading a provisional government.

The abdication of the emperor and the end of the war came as a profound shock to the German people, who had not been told of the deteriorating military situation. Many Germans believed that the German army had never been defeated in the field but had instead been stabbed in the back by socialist and liberal politicians. The "stab-in-the-back" legend quickly entered the political mythology of German conservative nationalists.

The Spartacist Revolt

Left-wing radicals sought to take advantage of the confused situation that prevailed in Germany during the weeks following the armistice. In January 1919, Communists attempted to seize power in Berlin. Karl Liebknecht (1871-1919) and Rosa Luxemburg (1870-1919) led these Communists, who were known as Spartacists. (They took their name from Spartacus, who led a slave revolt in Rome in the first century B.C.) The government succeeded in suppressing the revolt, and both Liebknecht and Luxemburg were killed.

The German republic was able to overcome the threats from the Spartacists and other leftists because it secured the support of both the army and the free corps, volunteer units of former soldiers, which numbered about 400,000 at their peak. Consisting mainly of embittered nationalists, the free corps symbolized the intense frustration of many conservative nationalists in the postwar era.

The Weimar Constitution

In January 1919, the German voters elected a National Assembly to draft a constitution for the new republic. An overwhelming majority supported the parties most committed to a democratic republic: the Majority Social Democrats. the Catholic Center, and the Democrats.

The National Assembly met in Weimar, a provincial town that had been an important literary and cultural center in the late eighteenth century.

Weimar stood as a symbol of a liberal Germany, in contrast to Berlin, which represented the Prussian tradition of authoritarianism and militarism.

The President

In one of its first acts, the National Assembly chose Friedrich Ebert as Germany's first president. The Weimar Constitution, approved in July, provided that future presidents would be popularly elected for a term of seven years and would be eligible for reelection. Article 48 of the constitution authorized the president to rule by decree in time of emergency.

The Parliament

The constitution established a two-house parliament. The lower house, the Reichstag, was elected by universal suffrage under a system of proportional representation, which allotted seats to the parties in direct proportion to the percentage of the votes they polled in the election.. This system assured representation to minor parties. However, it also served to encourage the development of a multiparty system, which made it impossible in practice for anyone party to win a majority of seats in the Reichstag. As a consequence, Germany experienced a succession of unstable coalition governments. The cabinet and the chancellor were responsible to the Reichstag, although they were technically appointed by the president.

The upper house, the Reichsrat, consisted of representatives elected by the parliaments of the eighteen German states. It had the power to delay the passage of legislation but could not permanently block bills favored by the Reichstag.

Conservative Influence

While Germany became a liberal, democratic republic, many conservative nationalists remained in positions of influence, serving as higher civil servants, judges, military officers, and professors and teachers. These conservative nationalists were unsympathetic to the new republic, and their opposition to it increased as a result of the Treaty of Versailles.

The wartime Allies refused to listen to German pleas for modifications of the treaty, and Germany was forced to accept it in June 1919. Almost from the beginning, therefore, the Weimar Republic was associated in the minds of the German people with the peace treaty they regarded as the "Dictate of Versailles."

The Kapp Putsch

In March 1920, conservative nationalists, led by Wolfgang Kapp (1858-1922), attempted to take power in Berlin. Although the conservative leaders of the army had been willing to defend the government against the Spartacists, they refused to act against Kapp. The government called on the workers in Berlin to stage a general strike. Activity in the capital ground to 'a halt, and the revolt collapsed. The Kapp Putsch served as a symbol of the hostility of many conservative nationalists to the republic.

The Ruhr Crisis and the Great Inflation

In 1921, the Allied Reparations Commission set Germany's reparations debt at 132 billion gold marks (approximately $33 billion), to be paid over a period of years. Germany protested the amount as excessive and during 1922, began to fall behind schedule in making its reparations payments.

Occupation of the Ruhr

In response to the German default, French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr valley, a major industrial center in western Germany, in January 1923. If the Germans would not pay reparations, then they would be taken from Germany's current production.

Unable to resist by force, the German government called on the workers in the Ruhr to begin a campaign of passive resistance. The workers refused to perform any work in the factories and mines that could benefit the occupiers.

Runaway Inflation

When the Ruhr workers began their passive-resistance campaign in early 1923, the German government had to assume the responsibility for supporting them. This was a costly undertaking, and the German government got the money it needed by printing it. Inflation became catastrophic, and the German mark became literally worthless. In November 1923, when the Germans introduced a currency reform, the mark stood at 4.2 trillion to the dollar.

While this inflation benefited debtors and some industrialists, who were able to eliminate their indebtedness and take over small competitors, it destroyed the savings of the German middle class. Threatened with being reduced to the status of proletarians, the middle class became more hostile toward the republic and more sympathetic to right-wing nationalist movements.

Stresemann's Currency Reform

In August 1923, Gustav Stresemann (1878-1929), a leader of the German People's Party, took office as chancellor, heading a broad coalition. In November, Stresemann carried through a currency reform, which replaced the inflated mark with a new mark, with an exchange rate of one new mark for one trillion old marks. The German mark thus regained its prewar exchange value of 4.2 marks to the dollar.

The Policy of Fulfillment

While Stresemann served as chancellor for only three months (August-November 1923), he remained Germany's foreign minister until his death in October 1929, promoting what came to be known as the policy of fulfillment. This policy reflected his belief that if Germany fulfilled its obligations under the Treaty of Versailles and sought a reconciliation in particular with France, the Allies might then agree to a revision of the treaty.

The Dawes Plan

Ending passive resistance in the Ruhr, Stresemann urged a study of the reparations issue. In 1924, an international commission headed by Charles G. Dawes (1865-1951), an American banker, proposed the Dawes Plan. While the Dawes Plan did not reduce Germany's total reparations debt, it provided that in years when the German economy was strong, the Germans would pay a larger amount of reparations. When the German economy was weak, the amount of the payment would be reduced. The Dawes Plan also provided for foreign loans to help Germany get its economy back on its feet. Following the acceptance of the Dawes Plan, France and Belgium ended the Ruhr occupation in 1925.

The Locarno Pact

In October 1925, Stresemann; Aristide Briand (1862-1932), the French foreign minister; and Austen Chamberlain (1863-1937), the British foreign secretary, signed the Locarno Pact. Germany and France promised to respect their mutual frontiers, and in addition, the Germans agreed to accept the permanent demilitarization of the Rhineland, which had been imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles. Great Britain and Italy served as guarantors of these commitments, pledging to intervene against any violator.

While there was no similar accord regarding the permanence of Germany's eastern frontiers, Germany signed arbitration treaties with Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Germany entered the League of Nations in 1926, receiving the permanent seat on the League Council that had originally been assigned to the United States.

The Young Plan

In 1929, the reparations issue received further consideration by an international commission headed by Owen D. Young (1874-1962), an American businessman. The Young Plan reduced Germany's total reparations obligation and extended the period for payment. The world depression soon hit Germany, however, and no further reparations payments were made after 1931.

The Young Plan was accompanied by an agreement to end the Allied occupation of the Rhineland in 1930, five years ahead of the date specified by the Treaty of Versailles. However, the permanent demilitarization of the Rhineland remained in effect.

German Dissatisfaction with Fulfillment Policy

Stresemann's policy of fulfillment did much to restore Germany's position in the European family of nations. Despite the agreements on reparations, however, the Germans continued to oppose having 10 pay any reparations at all. Furthermore, the Germans remained dissatisfied with their frontier with Poland and with the disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles, which placed restrictions on Germany's armed forces (see Chapter 29).

Germany's Domestic Recovery

During the late 1920s, Germany experienced a remarkable recovery as its finances remained stable and the economy prospered.

In addition, Germany experienced improved political stability. In 1925, President Ebert died in office. Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg (1847-1934), a hero of World War I, won the presidential election at the age of seventy-eight. Hindenburg was a conservative nationalist, but he was an honorable man who sincerely desired to abide by his oath to uphold the constitution. The election of Hindenburg may have helped strengthen the Weimar Republic by leading some of his fellow conservative nationalists to accept it.

The Great Depression

During 1930, the world depression struck Germany. Banks failed, foreign trade declined, factories closed, and millions of workers became unemployed.

In March 1930, President Hindenburg named Heinrich Brüning (1885-1970), a member of the Catholic Center Party, as chancellor. Brüning was unable to secure the support of a Reichstag majority, and Hindenburg invoked Article 48 of the constitution, which authorized him to rule by decree. In his attempt to deal with the depression, Brüning pursued a deflationary policy, reducing government expenditures in a time of declining tax revenues.

The 1930 Reichstag Election

The Reichstag election of September 1930 began the political crisis that resulted in Adolf Hitler's appointment to the chancellorship in January 1933. In this election, the extremist parties-the Nazis and the Communists-made substantial gains. Hitler's Nazi Party, which had won only 12 seats in the Reichstag in the 1928 election, suddenly became Germany's second-largest party, with 107 members in the Reichstag.

Nazi Supporters

The Nazis won their support primarily from the lower middle class and the peasantry. These voters were strongly nationalistic in their political views and feared that the depression would deprive them of their standard of living. In religion, most of the Nazis' supporters were Protestants. German Catholics remained firm in their support of the Catholic Center Party.

Attitude of Workers

Most of Germany's industrial workers continued to vote for the Social Democrats, which remained the largest party, with 143 seats in the Reichstag. However, many disgruntled industrial workers voted for the Communists, who elected 77 Reichstag deputies in place of the 54 elected in 1928.

Attitude of Big 8usiness

There is little evidence to support the view that Hitler received substantial financial support from big business. The conservative upper classes generally regarded Hitler as an uneducated demagogue and gutter politician.

The Emergence of Adolf Hitler (1889-1945)

Adolf Hitler, the Nazis' dynamic leader, was primarily responsible for his party's success in taking advantage of the opportunity created by the depression.

Youth and Early Career

Born in Braunau, Austria, Hitler was the son of a minor official in the Austro-Hungarian customs service. A poor student, he dropped out of secondary school and in 1907, set off for the Austrian capital of Vienna with the ambition to become an artist. The art academy refused to admit him, however, because of what it regarded as his insufficient talent. He also failed to gain admission to architectural school because he lacked a secondary-school diploma.

Political Views

Hitler lived in Vienna for several years, working at odd jobs and absorbing the ideas of Austrian right-wing extremists. In 1913, he left Vienna and moved to Munich in southern Germany. He took with him the basic political ideas to which he would remain committed for the balance of his life. Central to Hitler's thought were his notions of race. He believed in the racial superiority of the Germanic peoples (the Aryan race) and in the inferiority of other races, especially Jews but also Slavs and blacks. Hitler also advocated the Pan-German ideology that was popular among many Austrian extremists. Pan-Germanism held the view that all Germans should be united in a single state. In addition, Hitler was hostile to the ideology of Marxism, which emphasized the unity of the international working class rather than racial solidarity.

War Experience

Life in Munich proved no easier for Hitler than it had been in Vienna. When World War I broke out, Hitler enlisted in the German army. He served on the western front in France and was evidently a good soldier, winning the Iron Cross, although he was never promoted above the rank of corporal. When the war ended, Hitler was in a military hospital, recovering from a gas attack.

The Development of the Nazi Party

Following his discharge from the army, Hitler returned to Munich where he became involved with a small, ultranationalist political group. He soon became its leader, reorganizing the group as the National Socialist German Workers' Party, known as the Nazis. As the Nazis' absolute leader (Fuhrer), Hitler developed his skills as an orator in speeches denouncing the Treaty of Versailles and playing upon the emotions and prejudices of the crowds he addressed. He attracted a small number of committed followers and organized

some of them into a party militia, the storm troopers, also known as the SA or Brown Shirts. Ernst Roehm (1887-1934), a former major in the German army, served as the SA's leader. Other prominent Nazis who joined the party at this time included Rudolf Hess (1894-1987), who later became the party's deputy leader, and Hermann Goering (1893-1946), a wartime aviation ace who created Germany's new Luftwaffe (air force) in the 1930s.

The Beer Hall Putsch

The small Nazi Party first won national attention in the Beer Hall Putsch of November 1923, when the Ruhr crisis and the great inflation were at their height. Hitler and his Nazis joined with General Erich Ludendorff (1865-1937) and his conservative nationalist followers in an attempt to seize power in Munich. (The plot got its name because it was planned in one of Munich's beer halls.) Once they had taken Munich, Hitler and Ludendorff planned to use the Bavarian capital as a base of operations against the republican government in Berlin. The support that Hitler and Ludendorff expected to receive from some conservative Bavarian politicians failed to materialize, however, and the police easily suppressed the revolt.

Following the collapse of the Beer Hall Putsch, Hitler and Ludendorff were tried for treason. In recognition of his services to Germany during the war, Ludendorff was acquitted. The conservative judges allowed Hitler to use his trial as a propaganda forum for his ideas. Hitler was convicted but sentenced to a term of only five years. He was released after nine months.

Mein Kampf

While he was imprisoned, Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* ("My Struggle"). In addition to presenting a semi fictionalized account of his life, Hitler expounded at length on his ideas of German racial superiority, German nationalism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Marxism. In addition, the Nazi Führer set forth his notions of what German foreign policy ought to be. In Hitler's view, Germany was a vigorous and growing country that needed living space (*Lebensraum*). He did not believe that Germany should seek this living space through the acquisition of colonies, since Germany's former colonies had been readily seized by the Allies during World War I. Instead, Germany should find living space in the east at the expense of Russia. Before Germany could move to the east, it would first be necessary to defeat France, since the French would not sit idly by while Germany expanded. Hider also proposed that Germany should seek alliances with Great Britain and Italy. In his view, Germany's interests did not conflict with those of the British, whose interest

was focused on their empire, or the Italians, who hoped to expand in the Mediterranean area.

Hitler also decided while he was in prison to abandon any attempt to seize power by revolutionary means. Instead, he would seek to develop a mass party that could achieve power through the electoral process. During the late 1920s, however, Hitler made little progress winning mass support, although he did expand the Nazi Party's organization throughout Germany. Dr. Joseph Goebbels (1897-1945) developed the party's propaganda, while Heinrich Himmler (19001945) organized a second party militia, the Elite Guard (SS).

Hitler's Rise to Power

Following the elections of September 1930, Chancellor Brüning remained in power, ruling by decree in cooperation with President Hindenburg. The economic situation continued to deteriorate, and by March 1932 unemployment was over 6 million.

In the spring of 1932, Hitler decided to challenge Hindenburg for the presidency. In an effort to block Hitler, the Social Democrats, Catholic Center, and other moderate parties supported Hindenburg for reelection. Hindenburg won, polling almost 20 million votes to Hitler's 13 million.

Papen's Chancellorship

Following his reelection victory, Hindenburg dismissed Brüning from the chancellorship and named Franz von Papen (1879-1969), a conservative nationalist, to the post. Like his predecessor, Papen ruled by decree in association with the president.

In July 1932. Papen called for Reichstag elections, hoping to increase his support. Instead, the Nazis emerged as the largest party, polling 37 percent of the vote and winning 230 seats in the Reichstag.

In a final effort to increase his support in the Reichstag, Papen called new elections for November 1932. Nazi strength dropped slightly to 196 seats, while the Communists won 100 seats. Failing to win popular support, Papen resigned in early December.

Hitler's Appointment as Chancellor

As Papen's successor, Hindenburg appointed General Kurt von Schleicher (1882-1934). Earlier. Schleicher had intrigued against Papen. Now Papen intrigued against Schleicher.

Behind the scenes, Hitler and Papen developed a scheme that led to Hitler's appointment as chancellor. Hitler possessed what Papen and the

conservative nationalists lacked: a broad base of popular support. Papen and his allies believed, however, that Hitler did not have the ability to rule Germany. They expected to be able to use Hitler to destroy the democratic republic and replace it with a conservative, semiauthoritarian system such as had existed before 1918. Papen agreed to Hitler's demand for the chancellorship, expecting that he, as vice chancellor, would actually govern the country. Papen then convinced Hindenburg to dismiss Schleicher. On January 30, 1933, Hindenburg named Hitler to the chancellorship, with Papen as vice chancellor. Only two other Nazis served in the eleven-member cabinet, which consisted mainly of conservative nationalists.

The Creation of the Nazi Dictatorship

After taking office as chancellor, Hitler quickly outmaneuvered Papen and the conservative nationalists.

The Reichstag Fire

A new Reichstag election was scheduled for early March 1933. Only a few days before the election, on February 27, the Reichstag building was partially destroyed by fire. The Nazis may well have set the blaze, but they blamed the Communists, charging that the Communists were plotting to seize power. Hitler convinced Hindenburg to take strong action against the supposed Communist threat, and the president suspended freedom of speech and the press and other civil liberties.

March 1933 Election

The Nazis stepped up their harassment of their political opponents, and the March 5 election was held in an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. Polling 44 percent of the votes, the Nazis won 288 seats in the Reichstag. With the support of their conservative nationalist allies, who held 52 seats, the Nazis controlled a majority of the 647member Reichstag. The Nazi majority was even more substantial, since none of the 81 Communist deputies were allowed to take their seats.

The Enabling Act

On March 23, 1933, the Reichstag passed the Enabling Act, which gave dictatorial authority to Hitler's cabinet for four years. Armed with full powers, Hitler moved to eliminate all possible centers of opposition. His policy is known as *Gleichschaltung*, which translates literally as coordination. In this context, however, it meant more precisely subordination; that is,

subordinating all independent institutions to the authority of Hitler and the Nazi Party.

Consolidation of Nazi Power

In April 1933, the government abolished self-government in the German states by appointing governors responsible to the central government in Berlin. The states lost even more power in January 1934 when the Reichsrat, the upper house of the parliament, was abolished. The Reichsrat had represented the states.

In May 1933, the Nazis ordered the abolition of the independent labor unions. Both strikes and lockouts were prohibited, and a system of compulsory arbitration of labor-management disputes was established. All workers were compelled to join the German Labor Front, an agency of the Nazi Party, which was designed primarily to promote labor discipline rather than the interests of the workers.

During the spring of 1933, the Nazis moved to eliminate opposition political parties. In July, the Nazi Party became the only legal party.

Almost a year later, on June 3D, 1934, Hitler carried out a purge that took the lives of a number of dissident Nazi leaders and other opponents. The exact number of victims has never been determined, although it probably exceeded one hundred. Ernst Roehm, the SA leader, was among these victims. The influence of the SA now declined, while that of Himmler's SS, which provided the executioners for the purge, increased. Himmler also controlled the Gestapo, the secret police created by the Nazis.

Following the death of President Hindenburg on August 2, 1934, Hitler abolished the office of president and assumed the president's powers. The members of the armed forces were now required to take an oath of allegiance to Hitler. This oath represented an important step in the establishment of Hitler's control over Germany's armed forces.

Nazi Anti-Semitism

Soon after taking power in 1933, the Nazis began a campaign directed against Germany's Jews, who numbered some 600,000, about 1 percent of the population. In April 1933, Jews were deprived of their positions in the civil service. Jews were also barred from the universities, and restrictions were imposed on Jewish physicians and lawyers. The Nazis organized a nationwide boycott of shops and other businesses owned by Jews.

The Nuremberg Laws

The campaign against the Jews was intensified following the adoption of the Nuremberg Laws of 1935. These laws defined a Jew as any person with at least one Jewish grandparent. Some 2.5 million Germans, in addition to the 600,000 who regarded themselves as Jews, were affected by this definition. The Nuremberg Laws deprived Jews of their rights as citizens, and Jews were barred from marrying non-Jews.

Crystal Night

In 1938, a Polish Jew assassinated a German diplomat in Paris. In response, the Nazis organized a campaign of mob violence known as the Crystal Night, which gained its name from the broken glass resulting from the destruction of synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses. Jews were now forced to wear a yellow star of David, and the German Jewish community was compelled to pay a large indemnity.

These measures against the Jews of Germany served as a prelude to the Holocaust of World War II, when the Nazis embarked on a campaign to exterminate the Jews of Europe (see Chapter 35).

The Nazis and the Christian Churches

The failure of German Christians, both Catholics and Protestants, to offer vigorous resistance to the crimes of the Nazis in general and to their persecution of the Jews, in particular, has been the subject of much historical controversy. Nevertheless, for German Christians the Nazi era was a time of pressure and persecution.

The Evangelical Church

The Nazis attempted to subordinate the Christian churches to their control. The major Protestant denomination, the German Evangelical Church, was forced to accept the direction of a handpicked national bishop. Dissenting Protestants established the Confessing Church under the leadership of Pastor Martin Niemoeller (I892-1984). He and other dissident churchmen were imprisoned in concentration camps.

The Catholic Church

In July 1933, the Nazi regime signed a concordat with the Vatican, pledging to maintain the traditional rights of the Catholic Church in Germany. Increasing violations of the concordat led to protests from Catholic leaders. In 1937, Pope Pius XI (r. 1922-1939) joined these protests, issuing the encyclical letter *Mit Brennender Sorge* (“With Burning Concern”). For the

most part, however, both Protestant and Catholic leaders sought to avoid direct confrontations with the Nazi regime.

Nazi Economic Policy

Nazi regimentation extended to the economic sphere, although the property and profits of the capitalists were protected. In practical terms, the word "socialist" in the name of the Nazi Party did not refer to the nationalization of the means of production but rather to requiring the economy to serve the interests of the state.

Hitler succeeded in reducing unemployment by initiating public works projects, including the construction of superhighways (autobahns), and establishing the Labor Service to provide jobs for young workers who could not find employment in the private sector.

In 1936, the Four Year Plan was launched with the purpose of promoting economic self-sufficiency and of mobilizing the economy for war.

The Great Depression of the early 1930s resulted in the economic and political collapse of the Weimar Republic, Germany's post-World War I experiment in democracy. Adolf Hitler demonstrated his political skill in taking advantage of the opportunity provided by the depression. He developed his Nazi Party into a mass movement and used a combination of his popular support and behind-the-scenes intrigue to propel himself into power. Once he gained office, Hitler moved with ruthless determination to crush his opponents and establish his totalitarian dictatorship.