CHAPTER FIVE
Hitler’s Seizure of Power, 1930–1933

Introduction

One year before the Great Depression struck, the Nazis were the smallest political party in Germany. In the 1928 elections, they had polled only 800,000 votes and gained 12 seats in the Reichstag. It was the 1929 crash that provided the turmoil and trouble that not only gave the Nazi party new life but also was the final death blow to the German republic.

ELECTION OF 1930

Hitler had answers to all of Germany’s problems. With the help of his fanatical followers, he staged a whirlwind campaign for the 1930 elections. They put on dazzling torchlight parades with thousands of Stormtroopers goose-stepping under swastika banners. Records and films of Hitler’s speeches played in beer halls everywhere. The radio carried Hitler’s voice to homes in every corner of Germany.

It worked. Some 6.5 million German voters climbed on the Nazi bandwagon. One hundred seven seats in the Reichstag went to Nazi representatives. Next to the Social Democrats’ 143 seats, the Nazis now were second. Adolf Hitler was no longer a joke.

Nor were the communists. Coming in third with 4.5 million supporters and 77 Reichstag seats, they too, had proven their strength.

HITLER THE VOTE-GETTER

He Is a Powerful Speaker

What was it about Hitler that moved many good, sensible people to accept him? It was his voice. Judged by many to be the most powerful orator of modern times, Hitler was also said to be a mass hypnotist.

Like a locomotive, Hitler’s voice was always soft and even at the beginning of a speech. Then it picked up speed to a rapid fire of ranting, raving, and harsh screaming. All the while Hitler wildly waved his arms and slammed his fists on the podium to make each point. His pale blue eyes bulged and seemed to pin his audience to their seats.

His power over crowds was unbelievable. People listened with openmouthed attention. And they became hysterical right along with him. Women swooned and fainted. Men howled with excitement. To halt their earsplitting screams and thunderous applause instantly, Hitler needed only to raise a hand. After his speeches ended, many in his audiences could not even remember exactly what he had said. They were convinced only that Adolf Hitler was Germany’s Messiah, destined to save their nation.

He Is a Demagogue

What did Hitler say to create such hysteria? He was a demagogue, a selfish leader who took advantage of a bad situation. To gain support, he harped on the fears and worries of the masses and played upon their emotions. Then he promised a cure for each and every problem. However, his real motive was not really to help the people but to gain power and money for himself alone. Nevertheless, his technique worked, for there were very few Germans who remained untouched by their country’s critical problems. Millions of voters from all walks of life swallowed Hitler’s promises.

Unemployed workers went for Hitler’s promise of jobs and bread. Small farmers and shopkeepers who were nearly bankrupt accepted his pledge of decent earnings. Thousands of industrialists, hopeful of having their pockets filled with huge profits, also pulled the Nazi lever of the voting machines.

Millions of urban Germans, fed up with the crime and disorder in the cities, welcomed
Hitler’s promise to restore law and order. And when Hitler vowed to destroy the communists, he calmed the greatest fear of the upper and middle-class property owners: that the communists would take over Germany and seize all their private holdings and wealth.

Not many voters could resist Hitler’s promise to restore honor and glory to Germany. When he said he would tear up the hated Versailles Treaty, refuse to pay the war debts, and make the German army the strongest in all the world, it was exactly what Germans wanted to hear.

Furthermore, Hitler’s use of scapegoats for Germany’s battered condition freed millions from their own personal guilt. They wanted to believe Hitler when he shouted, “Traitorous politicians in the corrupt republic stabbed the German army in the back and made us lose the war! Down with the November Criminals!” And many, not wanting to be losers, rallied behind Hitler’s scream, “We Germans are a master race destined to rule the world!”

What about the “Jewish Question”? This was not a burning issue in the voters’ minds. Yes, there were anti-Semitic voters; but the majority of Germans were not against Jews per se. It was Hitler’s cure-all campaign that they liked. The Jewish issue was a sideline.

Hitler the orator knew this. So he always proceeded with caution in his attack on Jews. He always waited until he had whipped up the crowds to a frenzy before blasting Jews. “It is they who are the real enemies of our country. They dragged out the war and caused the inflation and depression. The Weimar government is nothing but a Jewish instrument! Free Germany from the Jews!” By then the crowds were willing to applaud anything Hitler said.

Unfortunately, even some of the initially unbiased would come to accept the idea of Jews as “the internal enemy of the Reich.” The next several years of Nazi propaganda in the new Nazi state would see to that.

CONDITIONS IN GERMANY WORSEN
(1930–1933)

Between 1930 and 1933, the depression deepened. To help Germany, American President Herbert Hoover declared a moratorium, or postponement, of Germany’s war debts in 1931. Then, at the Lausanne Conference in 1932, the country’s debts were cut drastically. Finally, Germany had to stop payments altogether. There was no money.

To make matters worse, the Weimar government stopped functioning. In a state of dead-lock, the political parties could not agree on a suitable program to ease the depression. Nazi delegates were pulling one way; communist delegates were pulling another. And the Social Democrats and other parties in the middle could not form a coalition. As a result, the Reichstag was dissolved time after time. New Reichstag elections were held over and over again. A series of new chancellors came and went. It was no use. The republic was all but dead. President Hindenburg (the old war general who had been elected president in 1925) and his cabinet were forced to run the government by passing emergency laws.

HITLER MANEUVERS HIS WAY TO POWER LEGALLY

Hitler’s Strategies

Meanwhile, with millions of the masses now behind him, Hitler still needed to do several things before Germany could legally become Nazified: (1) gain support of the Junker Nationalists, (2) crush the communists, (3) destroy the democrats, (4) have his Nazi representatives gain the majority of seats in the Reichstag, and (5) be named chancellor and then president.

Hitler Gains Control of the Nationalists

Moving first to gain the support of the monied classes, Hitler assured businesspeople that they would still be able to own, operate, and profit from their factories in the new Nazi
state. He told the aristocratic Junker army officers that they were to rebuild and command the Wehrmacht, the new and great army of the German people.

These groups took the bait. They began to pour millions into Nazi party funds. These Junkers and businesspeople had no real love for Hitler, whom they regarded as a crude nobody. But the logic behind their support went something like this:

*Only force can smash the Russian menace of communism in Germany. Perhaps this Hitler barbarian and his band of ruffians are the answer. And they do have the support of the German people. As Germans, at least they are the lesser of the two evils. Later, when Hitler is leader, we’ll tame him. He’ll be only a figurehead who follows our orders.*

Little did they know how violently their plan would backfire.

**The 1932 Elections**

Ex-army Corporal Hitler decided to run against Hindenburg, former commander-in-chief of the Reichswehr, for the office of president in the 1932 elections. He lost. However, Nazi power was growing steadily. Hindenburg scored 19 million votes to Hitler’s 13.5 million. Again the communist candidate came in third.

When national elections were held in July 1932, the Nazis emerged as the largest single political party in Germany, with 230 seats in the Reichstag. Encouraged Stormtroopers began to slaughter hundreds of communist and socialist workers in the streets. Their murderous attacks on unarmed Jews began to increase.

However, in November 1932 when the Reichstag was dissolved and new elections held again, the Nazis lost 2 million votes. Hitler was worried. So were the Junkers and big businessmen, who saw the republic quickly crumbling and communism right around the corner. They decided to move quickly.

**Hitler Is Named Chancellor**

On January 30, 1933, President Hindenburg named Adolf Hitler the new German chancellor. He had done so very reluctantly, for he despised Hitler; but he had given in to men around him who urged the appointment. The aging president had taken one safety precaution first: He had selected a new eleven-man cabinet including only three Nazis and eight other men who he felt would keep Hitler in hand. He couldn’t have been more wrong.

**Communists and Democrats Are Hitler’s Next Victims**

Chancellor Hitler was ready for his next kill: the 100 communist and 121 Social Democratic delegates who stood in the way of a Nazi party majority in the Reichstag. Calling for new elections to be held on March 5, 1933, he set out to destroy his competitors.

On the night of February 24, 1933, Nazi Hermann Goering led a small group of Stormtroopers through an underground passageway leading from his home to the Reichstag building. They carried gasoline with them. Flames soon shot up through the dome and windows of the Reichstag building, gutting it within a few hours.

“The communists did it!” Hitler later screamed. “It’s the beginning of another Bolshevik Revolution!” Within twenty-four hours after the Reichstag fire, Hitler had talked the frightened President Hindenburg into signing an emergency law called The Law for the Protection of the People and State. It gave the government the right to arrest or even kill “enemies” of the German nation. With the signing of this law, all civil rights in Germany went down the drain. The Nazi reign of terror began.

Hitler’s delighted Stormtroopers became mad dogs. Without warrants, they burst into homes, arrested tens of thousands of people, and dragged them off to prison. When the jails overflowed, the building of concentration camps began.
Communists were not the only ones to be arrested. Hitler used the new law to houseclean Germany of all his political enemies: Social Democrats, Socialists, Catholic Center party members, and trade union leaders. But not many Jews. Not yet. Special treatment for them was in the planning stages.

The Nazis Gain the Majority of Seats in the Reichstag

Just as Hitler had ordered, elections were again held on March 5, 1933. Frightened by the “new communist revolt,” over 17.25 million Germans voted for the Nazis. Still a majority of Germans did not want them. With only 43 percent of the popular vote and 288 seats in the Reichstag, the Nazis needed to gain more ground.

It was the Nationalist party delegates that tipped the scales in the Nazis’ favor. Joining ranks with Hitler’s men, their support gave the Hitlerites 52 percent of the vote in the Reichstag.

Hitler didn’t stop there. Calling them enemies of the state, he ordered the immediate arrest of the 81 communist delegates and dozens of Social Democrat representatives from the Reichstag. Now the Nazis had the absolute majority they needed.

The Enabling Act Makes Hitler the Absolute Lawmaker

On March 24, 1933, the predominantly Nazi Reichstag passed another new law called the Enabling Act. This law gave Adolf Hitler sole power to make laws “to fight the crisis of the people and the state” without the consent of the parliament or the authorization of the constitution. The Weimar democracy and its constitution were now dead. The Third Reich, with Hitler as the supreme lawmaker, had begun. Hitler’s war on Jews was about to start. On March 26, Hitler gave Josef Goebbels instructions to organize a boycott of Jewish businesses.

Four months later, on July 14, 1933, Hitler made another law that proclaimed the Nazi party the only legal political party in Germany. All others were outlawed.

Hitler Destroys the Stormtroopers in Order to Become President

To become absolute dictator of Germany, Chancellor Hitler still needed to be named president. In July 1934, eighty-six-year-old President Hindenburg was ill and near death. Hitler knew he could not gain this office without the support of the Junker army generals. However, there was one problem in the way—his Stormtroopers.

Now that Hitler had made it to the top, the Stormtroopers were getting restless. Rohm and his bullies clamored for a second revolution: “We did all the work to get you where you are. Now give us our due! We want the land, the money, the jobs, and the factories. Down with the Junker aristocrats! Germany’s riches belong to us!” Furthermore, Rohm, Hitler’s friend and right-hand man for over fifteen years, now wanted Hitler to name him minister of defense and to make the Brownshirts the official People’s Army of Germany.

The proud generals, with the aristocratic “von” before their names, would not hear of this. To make the Brownshirts—that band of drunkards and misfits—the official Wehrmacht was, to them, out of the question. Before they would allow that, they threatened to knock the Nazis out of politics and to bring a Hohenzollern prince back to the throne.

Hitler knew that these well-trained Prussian soldiers and their powerful military weapons could overthrow him. He also realized that only they, and not his crude band of SA street fighters, could conquer Europe and lead Germany to new glory. He decided his Stormtroopers had to go.

Hitler made a bargain with the army high command. He asked them to support him for president after Hindenburg’s death. In return, he promised to destroy his SA and to give the
old generals the same privilege they had enjoyed under the kaiser—a share in government power. In addition, Hitler assured them that they alone would bear arms and command.

The old monocled, high-booted officers shook hands with Hitler on the bargain. However, they really had other ideas. They reasoned that since they had used Hitler once before as their puppet to crush the communists and the republic, they could now use him to destroy the SA gangsters who were ravaging the country. Once that was done, they were sure they could tame this ex-corporal. So they thought.

In the end, the officers were to learn a bitter lesson: Hitler was no man’s puppet, and his SS would become far more deadly and powerful than the SA had ever been.

Meanwhile, on June 30, 1934, Hitler and his SS began their massacre of the Stormtroopers. In a two-day shooting spree, later referred to as the Rohm Blood Purge, the SS gunned down more than a thousand of their Nazi SA brothers. Rohm, too, was shot to death. After this, the SA faded away.

**HITLER BECOMES DICTATOR OF GERMANY**

On August 2, 1934, President Hindenburg died. The day before, Hitler had made another new law, combining the offices of chancellor and president into one. Creating a new title for himself, Hitler became Reichsfuehrer, or leader of the Reich.

He also became commander-in-chief of the army. Within hours after Hindenburg’s death, Hitler made all army personnel swear an oath of allegiance—not to their country but to him.

The army was his. The government was his. On August 19, 1934, Hitler announced a plebiscite, or a direct vote of approval, of the people on his becoming Reichsfuehrer. Of the more than 43 million who cast votes, 38 million approved Hitler as their leader.

It seemed the people were his, too.

And just as he had once planned while a convict in Landsberg Prison, Adolf Hitler and the Nazis had come to power legally.

German Jews had voted in the election, too. Al Lewin, a Holocaust survivor who was an eight-year-old living in Berlin at the time, says:

_I couldn’t vote, of course, but my father did. I remember he told us all about it. There was a voting booth. An SS man stood watching. Hitler said he made it legally. Yes, that’s true. But as for the counting of the votes, we didn’t know the actual number for sure. It wasn’t really a free and open situation like we have in this country. Someone was there watching over the vote-counting._