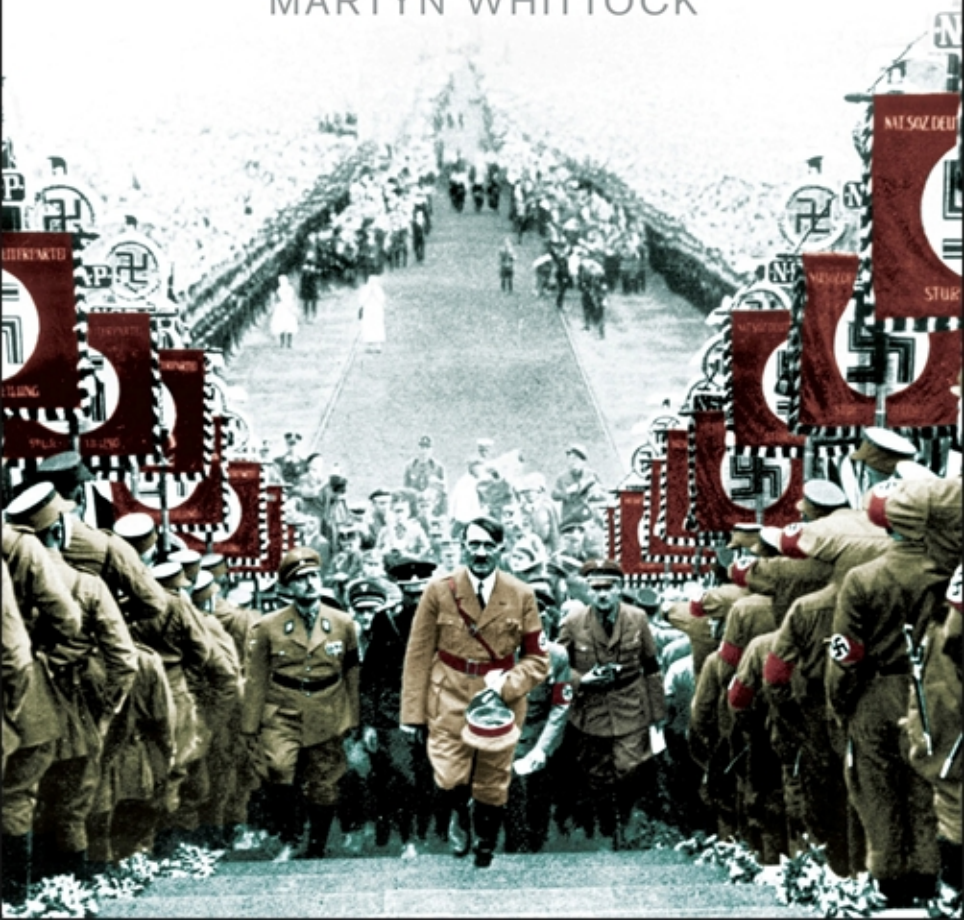


A | B R I E F | H I S T O R Y | O F

# THE THIRD REICH

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE NAZIS

MARTYN WHITTOCK



A BRIEF HISTORY OF  
**THE THIRD REICH**

MARTYN WHITTOCK



**ROBINSON**



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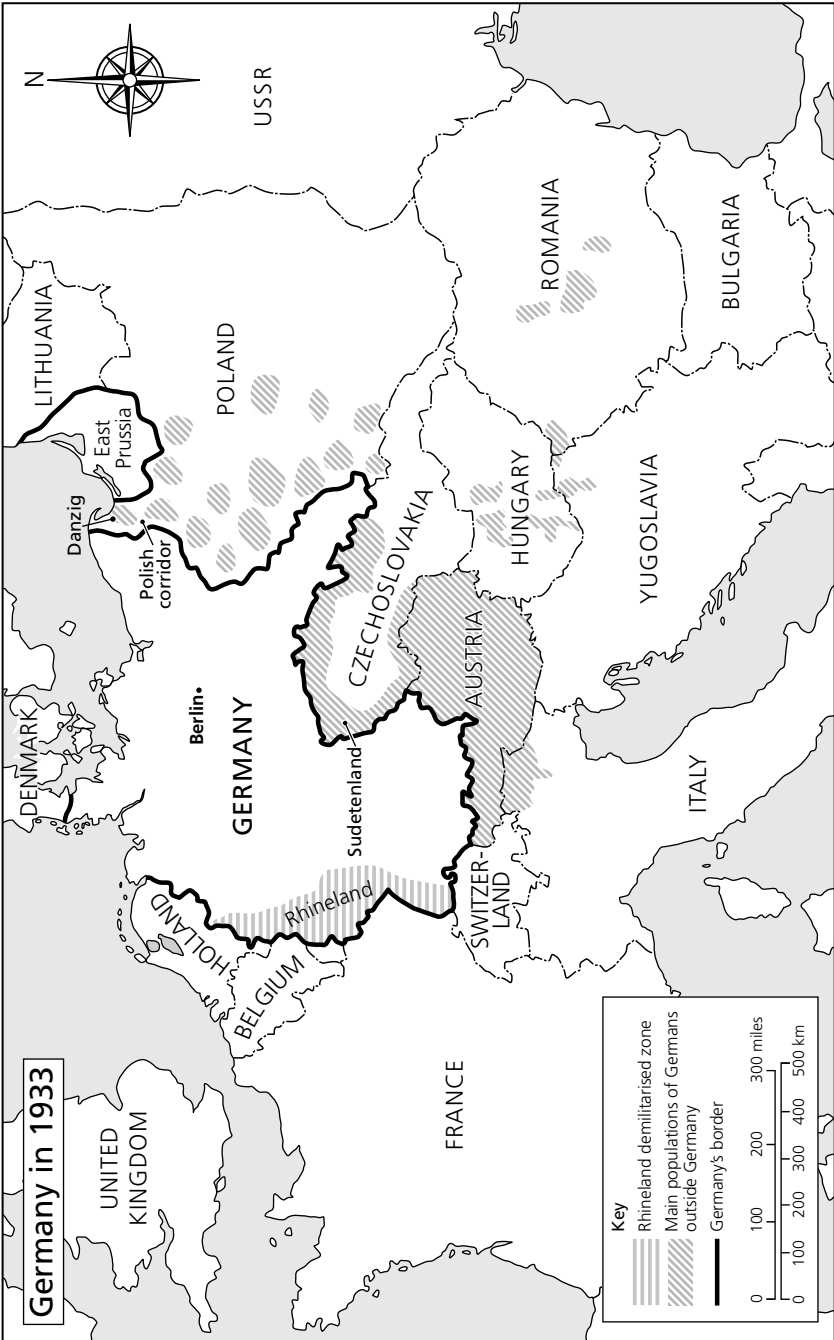
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




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It goes without saying that all errors are my own.

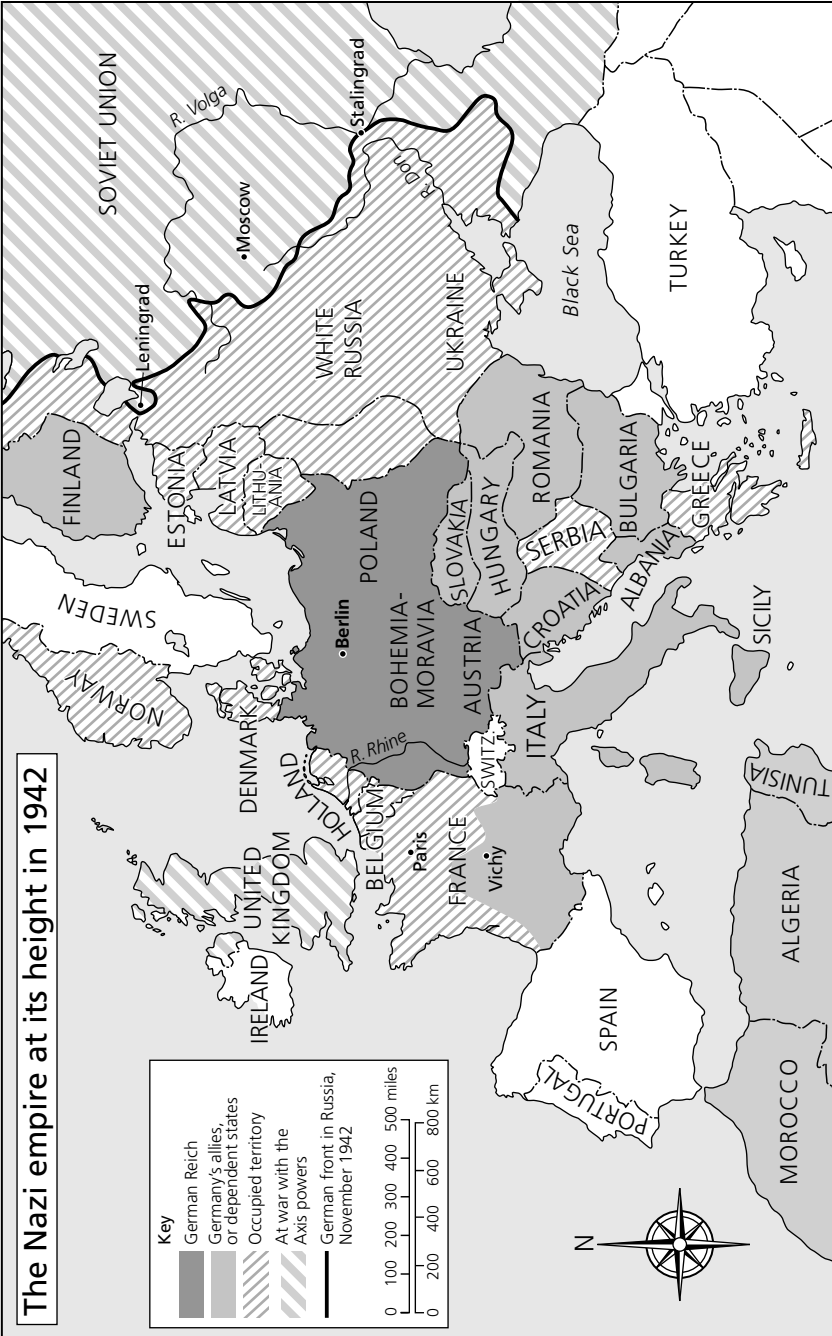


# The Nazi empire at its height in 1942

**Key**

-  German Reich
-  Germany's allies, or dependent states
-  Occupied territory
-  At war with the Axis powers
-  German front in Russia, November 1942

0 100 200 300 400 500 miles  
0 200 400 600 800 km



## INTRODUCTION

The Third Reich remains one of the most striking episodes of world history in the twentieth century. The genocide against the Jews, the launching of the Second World War, the multiple abuses of power, the cruelty and suffering that were imposed on millions were all central features of Hitler's Nazi regime. Yet the Nazis were also highly successful in manipulating images and information: they mobilized and engaged vast numbers of people; they caught the imagination of the young and appeared remarkably modern to contemporary observers. This reminds us how complex the Third Reich was and how difficult to easily categorize. Was it aiming to create a throw-back to a mythical past or was it looking forward to a brutally modernist and technologically advanced state? Was Hitler a strong and controlling dictator who achieved his clear goals, while dividing and ruling, or were his indolent personality and chaotic style of government the symptoms of a weak dictator who was unable to control the complex and contradictory forces that he unleashed? Was the Third Reich directed from above, or strongly influenced from below? Was it ruled by terror, or largely supported by a compliant German population? Was Hitler a popular dictator? Was the genocide against



the Jews a peculiarly German phenomenon, or a particularly German version of terrible wider trends?

The aim of this book is to explore these – and other – key questions and to give an overview of the complex evidence. Historians' interpretations will be examined in order to suggest conclusions that take account of the different views that they represent. The evidence from the time itself is varied and complex: official statistics, state-sponsored art, secret police reports, public speeches and propaganda combine with diaries, letters and memoirs, humour and personal reminiscences to provide a multi-faceted view of life in the Third Reich. We will hear the thoughts of SS officers, German peasants, extermination-camp victims and survivors, opposition politicians, Nazi loyalists and resistance plotters, businessmen, ordinary men, women and children. Some will reveal the thoughts of 'insiders'; others will reveal the outlook and experiences of those who were very much 'outsiders' in the ruthlessly categorized Third Reich.

Finally, it may be helpful to explain something of the approach of this book. History must put us firmly in touch with the lives of – and issues facing – people in the past. It is right that the examination of the evidence makes the personal experiences of those in the past more accessible, as well as outlining the wider processes and developments that acted on individuals. In order to assist in this balance, each chapter will frequently refer to individuals' lives, thoughts and experiences in order to illustrate the wider issues in personal terms. In this way, we see the people within the history and appreciate how the historic events impacted on them. For in the vast numbers, appalling sufferings and huge distances covered in any history of the Third Reich, we must never lose sight of the individuals whose lives were caught up in these titanic events. For history is fundamentally about his-story and her-story . . .

# I

## **THE NAZI RISE TO POWER, 1918–23: FROM THE END OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR TO THE MUNICH PUTSCH**

Anton Drexler was born in Germany in 1884 and first worked as a machine-fitter, before becoming a locksmith in Berlin in 1902. Despite his extreme nationalism he was judged physically unsuitable for military service and so, to his great disappointment, did not fight in the First World War. In 1919 – bitter at the defeat of Germany and alarmed at the social and political turmoil of post-war Bavaria – he co-founded the German Workers' Party (the DAP) in Munich. Drexler was typical of a vulnerable section of the German population, the lower middle class. Possessing sufficient skills and independence to raise them above the mass of workers, such people were desperate to avoid any downwardly mobile pressures that might force them into the ranks of the working class. Made insecure by the economic and political upheaval in post-war Germany, such people were quick to blame Jews, socialists and communists for Germany's plight.

The DAP was only one of many tiny *völkisch* (ethnic/racist) parties in Bavaria. Their common feature was their

racist belief in the purity of German blood and German culture. Beyond that, their beliefs were a strange mixture of extreme nationalism, anti-Semitism and right-wing militarism, blended with a radical and semi-socialist resentment of capitalism, large department stores and unearned profits. As such, they were difficult to place on any political spectrum as they represented the anxieties, fears and resentments of those who felt themselves squeezed from above and below. Below them were the unionized workers with their internationalist allegiances to class rather than race; above them were the more comfortably off and the rich, whose nationalism was basically conservative.

In 1919, one of the DAP's meetings was attended by an obscure army corporal of Austrian origin – Adolf Hitler. Drexler gave Hitler a pamphlet entitled 'My Political Awakening' and, according to Hitler's later thoughts expressed in his own political biography, *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*), Drexler's pamphlet reflected many of Hitler's own emerging beliefs. As a result, Hitler decided to join Drexler's tiny party and, by 1920, his rhetorical skills were both drawing in the crowds and overshadowing Drexler. That same year, he persuaded Drexler to change the party's name to the National Socialist German Workers' Party (the NSDAP, or Nazis). In 1921, Drexler's leadership was challenged by Hitler and, after a brief resistance, Drexler resigned. Without the skills or organization to resist Hitler, Drexler left the NSDAP in 1923 and was a largely forgotten figure by the time he died in Munich in February 1942. By that time the party that Hitler had hijacked had been in power for almost ten years and had unleashed a world war of unbelievable savagery. German troops occupied Europe from the Atlantic to southern Russia and the mass killing of Jews in Eastern Europe had been taking place since the previous summer. That would have been impossible to imagine in the years immediately following Germany's defeat in 1918, but the roots of what Hitler would come to call the Third Reich went back deep into that

troubled and turbulent period and into the whirlpool of contradictory beliefs which lay at the heart of Drexler's little political party.<sup>1</sup>

## **National defeat and the establishment of the Weimar Republic**

As Germany faced defeat in November 1918 it was disintegrating. Sailors mutinied in the ports of Wilhelmshaven, Kiel and Hamburg; workers and ex-soldiers set up revolutionary *soviets* (revolutionary councils, named after those recently established in communist Russia) in Berlin and other cities. The German Emperor – Kaiser Wilhelm II – fled to Holland and a new democratic government replaced him. This was a moderate socialist government, led by the leader of the German Social Democratic Party (the SPD), Friedrich Ebert. On 11 February 1919, Ebert was elected as the first President of the new German republic. He remained President until his death in February 1925. Under his presidency, Germany was to survive the upheavals of 1919 and eventually achieved sufficient stability to make it appear that Germany really did have a democratic future.<sup>2</sup>

But first, Ebert's new government faced massive unrest. Armed workers and soldiers – inspired by the recent 1917 revolution in Russia – attempted communist uprisings in various parts of Germany. These were bloodily put down by the army and groups of nationalist and right-wing ex-soldiers known as the *Freikorps* (Free Corps). By 1919, there were nearly 200 of these Freikorps groups in Germany. While they were used by the new government to crush revolts by communists, they had no love for democracy either. In January 1919, a group of communists attempted to seize power in Berlin. These were the Spartakists, who shortly before this revolt had set up the German Communist Party (the KPD). The 'Spartakist revolt' was bloodily crushed by the Freikorps, who were prepared to help Ebert's government because they hated communism even more than they hated the Social Democrats.

As a result, the government of Ebert survived, but this led to a bitter split between the moderate socialists of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Communist Party (KPD). This meant that left-wing political parties in Germany hated each other as much as they hated their nationalist opponents. In Munich, the capital of Bavaria (which was one of the German states), the Bavarian government was overthrown and an independent communist soviet republic was briefly set up under Kurt Eisner. But this too was eventually crushed by the army and Freikorps and its leaders killed.<sup>3</sup>

While Germany was in the middle of this unrest, a new constitution was created for the nation. This constitution was settled in the city of Weimar because the capital, Berlin, was in chaos due to the Spartakist revolt. As a consequence, the German government from 1919 until Hitler came to power in January 1933 is called the 'Weimar Republic'.

In 1919, the new Weimar government agreed to the Treaty of Versailles which formally ended the First World War. The victorious Allies (most notably Britain, France and the USA) imposed a very harsh set of demands on Germany in order to weaken it so that it would never again threaten the peace of Europe.<sup>4</sup> The aim was also to extend the principle of self-determination by which people were able to be part of countries made up of their own ethnic group. In this way, Poland was formed from land that had once been ruled by Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia. But millions of Austrians (now a small country, without its great empire) were not free to join their fellow Germans in an *Anschluss* (union) of the two countries. Consequently, democracy and the new Weimar Republic seemed associated with defeat and humiliation and this would assist those more extreme groups who hoped to undermine it in the 1920s. To them the politicians who had led Germany out of the war in 1918 were the 'November Criminals' and the 'criminals' had compounded their guilt by signing the humiliating Treaty of Versailles.

Many Germans were unwilling to believe that the mighty German army had been defeated in the First World War. They

preferred to believe it had been betrayed by socialist politicians, communist revolutionaries and Jews (despite the small size of the German Jewish population and its high level of integration into German society). The unrest after the end of the war also made it easier for these people to believe that Germany was in danger of a communist revolution. As a result there remained a great deal of support in the 1920s for the army and for nationalism, despite the disaster of defeat in 1918 that these two forces had, in reality, brought on Germany. On top of this, the harsh treatment by the Treaty of Versailles made it easier to direct anger at enemies abroad than admit that Germany's military ambitions had brought many of these problems on itself.<sup>5</sup>

### **The increasing problems of the Weimar Republic**

The new Weimar Republic faced a number of escalating problems. Firstly, the Social Democratic government's fear of communist revolution caused it to over-estimate the threat and to rely on conservative and military forces in Germany. This encouraged groups who, in reality, hated the Social Democrats and had no love for democracy either.

Secondly, the working class, who might otherwise have provided a foundation of support for the Weimar Republic, was deeply divided. In 1917, wildcat strikes had affected many urban areas. Then the Spartakist revolt had ended in bloody defeat. In May 1919, the Munich soviet republic had finally been crushed by the army and Freikorps. In 1920, radical workers (the 'Red Ruhr Army') had seized power in the industrial area of Rhineland-Westphalia. The uprising was again ruthlessly crushed by army and Freikorps units on behalf of the central government. Ironically, many of these soldiers had earlier in the year supported a Freikorps uprising (the 'Kapp Putsch') against that very government.<sup>6</sup> In each of these failed uprisings it was radical workers (many of whom were communists) who had fallen in a battle that was as much against the Social Democrat-led government as against the forces of

capitalism. With better-off and more qualified workers (and their trade unions) backing the government, this left the German working class bitterly split. This inability to unite against the forces of the right would be a major weakness of this social group right up to Hitler coming to power in January 1933.

Thirdly, the very structure of the Weimar constitution created problems for the government. The voting system of proportional representation tended to encourage the growth of many small parties. This made it hard to form a strong government to deal with problems. The elected president had the power to make laws without the agreement of the *Reichstag* (parliament) in times of national emergency (Article 48). This weakened the power of the Reichstag and, therefore, weakened the new democracy.

Fourthly, many middle-class Germans distrusted the new democratic system. Most civil servants and judges continued in post into the Weimar Republic, although many were not sympathetic to Weimar, or democracy, and were biased towards right-wing nationalist groups. Similarly, the army remained very influential and had little loyalty towards Weimar, or democracy. General Seeckt, Chief of the Army Command (1920–6) kept the army under control and reduced the power of the Freikorps but was determined to keep the army independent of the government. And many in the army believed they had the right to decide what was best for the nation. All of these factors made it hard to establish a modern and democratic government.

Furthermore, there were just too many paramilitary groups in Weimar Germany. The Nazis had their brown-shirted fighting units of the SA, the Communist Party had its 'Red Front Fighters' League', the Social Democratic Party had its 'Reich Banner, Black-Red-Gold' organization, the conservative nationalists had the ex-soldiers of the 'Steel Helmets'. And these were in addition to the death squads operated by the Freikorps. This general level of paramilitary violence undermined

political stability. Indeed, some German states would even come to ban glass ashtrays at political meetings and the carrying of walking sticks in public as both were all too frequently used as offensive weapons!<sup>7</sup>

As if its political problems were not severe enough the Weimar government faced severe economic problems too. The pressure to pay reparations (compensation) to the victorious Allies was high and the government printed money to pay its debts, causing inflationary pressures within the German economy. Also, paying for new social reforms was expensive and the government struggled to afford it. This was made worse in 1923, when the French occupied the German Ruhr coalfields. The French hoped to force payment of reparations, as Germany was falling behind on these. This was another blow to the German economy. All these problems led to hyperinflation in 1923. Money rapidly lost its value. By November 1923 it cost 200,000,000,000 marks to buy just one US dollar. To put this into perspective, an egg cost 100 million marks! Two women out shopping with a basket crammed with bank notes put down the basket to look in a shop window. When they turned back they found that the money was still there but that the basket had been stolen. After all, a basket was worth something! Members of the middle class, and others with savings and fixed pensions, saw these become worthless overnight and workers' wages collapsed in value. However, many larger German firms actually benefitted from this as it kept their labour costs down and these firms resisted attempts to stabilize the currency.<sup>8</sup>

### **The early years of the Nazi Party**

For the parties on the extreme right of German politics the crisis of 1923 was fortuitous and for none more so than for the NSDAP – the Nazi Party. The roots of the Nazi Party reached back, as we have seen, to January 1919 when Anton Drexler and a sports journalist named Karl Harrer started a small political group in Munich, which they called the German Workers'



Party (the DAP). Its formative period coincided with Hitler's return to Munich.

Having fought in the German army during the First World War, despite his Austrian citizenship, Hitler returned to Munich (his adopted city since 1913) in 1919, where he was recruited into the political department of the army. His job was to spy on the meetings of political parties in the city. Visiting a meeting of the DAP in September 1919, Hitler liked many of its ideas and realized it was a party in which he could have real influence. Later, Nazi legends claimed he was the seventh member, but in reality he joined as member number 555.

In February 1920, Hitler and Drexler put together the '25 Point Programme' – the aims of the party. At this time the party also changed its name from the German Workers' Party (DAP) to the National Socialist German Workers' Party (the NSDAP), or the 'Nazis'. The fact the word 'socialist' still had a place in the title shows the party was attempting to appeal to German workers and draw them away from the attractions of communism. These '25 Points' were never altered and remained the official aims of the party, even though Hitler soon came to ignore them.

In 1921, Hitler became the party's *Führer* (leader).<sup>9</sup> The growing cult of the leader can be seen in the terminology used in the Nazi-owned press.<sup>10</sup> In December 1922, an article in the Nazi newspaper the *Völkischer Beobachter* (*Racial Observer*) made the claim for the first time that he was '*the Führer*, for whom Germany was waiting'.<sup>11</sup> Under his influence the party took on the Nazi salute, the brown-shirted uniform, the swastika flag and the presence of armed squads to defend its meetings and break up the meetings of opponents. These would eventually become the brown-shirted *Sturmabteilung* (Storm Division), or SA, led by Ernst Röhm.

The new Nazi Party programme proclaimed beliefs including: the unity of all German speakers, tearing up the Treaty of Versailles and discrimination against Jews. Amongst these

typical demands of the right wing, there were also left-wing calls for nationalization of major industries and profit sharing. And the concerns of the lower middle class appeared in the pleas to shut department stores to protect small shopkeepers and grant land to peasants. But Hitler was always reluctant to be tied down by a political manifesto. For him the seizure of unfettered power was crucial. Otto Strasser, one-time friend of Hitler, recalls an early argument they once had:

“Power!” screamed Adolf. “We must have power!” “Before we gain it,” I replied firmly, “let us decide what we propose to do with it. Our programme is too vague; we must construct something solid and enduring.” Hitler thumped the table and barked, “Power first! Afterwards we can act as circumstances dictate!”<sup>12</sup>

As part of this ruthless pursuit of power, Hitler deliberately provoked his political enemies and the Bavarian authorities. This both intimidated opponents and drew attention to the Nazi Party through acts of beer-hall violence.<sup>13</sup> But the most ambitious provocation was yet to come . . .

### **The Munich Putsch, 1923**

In November 1923, Hitler and a group of nationalists tried to seize power in Munich, the capital of Bavaria, in southern Germany. This was the infamous ‘Munich Putsch’. The Nazis hoped that a march on Berlin, following a seizure of power in Munich, might win popular support because so many Germans were angry at the French occupation of the German Ruhr coal-fields in January 1923 and the economic crisis that followed, leading to hyperinflation. During 1923, the Nazi Party membership rose from 20,000 to 55,000 and seemed to suggest the tide of public opinion might be starting to flow their way. It appeared that the Weimar Republic was doomed. In addition, a new government, opposed to the Weimar Republic, had come to power in Bavaria and it was possible that its members would be sympathetic to Nazi ideas. On the evening of 8 November, Hitler and his supporters seized control of a beer hall in which the leader

of the Bavarian government, Gustav von Kahr, was speaking to a large meeting. Hitler declared that a 'National Revolution' had started. Persuading von Kahr to agree to support him, the next morning Hitler led a march into central Munich. But von Kahr, now convinced that Hitler would fail, decided to resist the revolt<sup>14</sup> and loyal troops and police fired on the marchers. Fourteen of Hitler's supporters and four policemen were killed as the two sides exchanged fire. The man next to Hitler was killed, but Hitler escaped with only a dislocated shoulder.

Hitler went into hiding at a supporter's house south of Munich, but on 11 November he was arrested by the police and charged with High Treason. Placed in cell number 7 at Landsberg Prison he awaited trial. It looked as if he was finished. The Nazi Party was banned and its leaders were arrested, or went into hiding. The Bavarian völkisch movement (the collection of racist political organizations allied to the Nazis) broke apart into its squabbling little groups again.

However, Hitler (who could have faced the death penalty for both treason and the deaths of the four policemen killed during the Putsch) was only sentenced to five years in prison and a fine of 200 gold marks, with the prospect of early release. The court rejected the idea of deporting him to his native Austria, despite the fact that he was not formally a German citizen. This raised the question: why the leniency? The reason was a mixture of sympathy for Hitler's anti-Weimar beliefs and the fact that the Bavarian government had been keen to cover up its own treasonable actions against the Berlin government. Leniency towards those accused of leading the Putsch helped to encourage the burying of embarrassing facts.<sup>15</sup> In Landsberg Prison, where he only served nine months of his sentence, Hitler enjoyed a large and comfortable cell, had free access to visitors (over 500 visited him), and could receive flowers, letters and presents. He was allowed to dictate his life story (*Mein Kampf*) to the two Nazis imprisoned there with him (his chauffeur Emil Maurice and Rudolf Hess, who would one day be deputy leader of the Nazi Party).

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's earlier attacks on Jewish capitalists became overshadowed by his new focus on what he called 'Jewish Bolshevism'. In his mind, the Jews dominated the world through their control of the two forces of Bolshevism (Russian communism) and world capitalism. The fact that these two groups were completely opposed to each other posed no difficulty to Hitler. As far as he was concerned, the Jews were behind both and both were the enemies of German nationalism. This astonishing conspiracy theory was widely accepted by many anti-Semitic groups and it gave coherence to the otherwise mutually irreconcilable twin hatreds of the lower middle class: communism and capitalism. The fact that some leading capitalists were Jewish and that Karl Marx had been Jewish, as were a number of leading communists in the USSR, seemed sufficient evidence to back up belief in this fantastic conspiracy. The weightier fact that most capitalists and communists were not Jewish was ignored. As was the fact that communism and capitalism were systems that were utterly opposed to each other. In the world of anti-Semitic conspiracy theorists such awkward realities had no place and these theorists lived in a strange mental landscape, which suited their personal needs and phobias but bore no resemblance to the landscape of the real world. As a consequence, for Hitler, what lay ahead was a struggle to the death between Germany and these two linked systems.<sup>16</sup> When, later in 1941, Germany invaded the USSR, it was the climax of this crusade against 'Jewish Bolshevism'. Hitler's ideas and plans were developed further in the *Zweites Buch* (*Second Book*). This unedited manuscript of Hitler's thoughts on foreign policy was written in 1928 and was never published in his lifetime. Undiscovered until 1945, this book was not published until 1961 (in German) and lacked an authoritative English version until 2003. (For a more detailed exploration of Hitler's foreign policy plans, see Chapter 15.)

However, the fact that Hitler committed his general goals to paper should not lead us to assume that he had some clear and

detailed plan of how to achieve his aims. It is clear that, although Hitler was willing to be flexible on short-term goals and methods, the long-term aims laid out in these books remained fixed in his mind and actions until his suicide in Berlin in 1945. Similarly, the fact that Nazi ideas were often confused and that the Nazis were willing to promise contradictory things to different groups of people should not make us think they did not have strongly held beliefs. At the core of all the confusion were things that Hitler and his followers were determined to do, even if the methods and details were unclear in the mid-1920s.