

Nazism and the Rise of Hitler

The Experience of Germany After World War I

- **Helmuth's Story:** In spring 1945, an 11-year-old boy named Helmuth overheard his father, a physician and Nazi supporter, discussing the possibility of killing their family or committing suicide. His father feared revenge from the Allies for their actions during the war. After spending a last happy day together, Helmuth's father took his own life, leaving Helmuth traumatized and refusing to eat at home for nine years.
- **Nazism as a System:** The narrative highlights that Nazism was not just a series of violent acts but a comprehensive ideology with deep-rooted ideas about politics and society.
- **Germany's Surrender:** In May 1945, Germany surrendered to the Allies. Anticipating defeat, Hitler and key Nazi officials, including Goebbels, committed suicide in April.
- **Nuremberg Trials:** An International Military Tribunal was established in Nuremberg to prosecute Nazi war criminals for Crimes Against Humanity, including the genocide of millions, such as 6 million Jews and many others like Gypsies and disabled individuals.
- **Genocidal War:** Germany's actions during the war were characterized by a genocidal campaign, leading to mass murders in places like Auschwitz, where many were gassed.
- **Consequences for Nazis:** The Nuremberg Tribunal sentenced only a few leading Nazis to death, with many others receiving life sentences. The punishments were seen as insufficient compared to the severity of their crimes.
- **Post-WWI Context:** The rise of Nazi Germany was partly attributed to the German experience after World War I. The harsh penalties imposed on Germany after the First World War contributed to economic and social unrest, which the Nazis exploited to gain power.

1. Birth of the Weimar Republic

- **World War I Background:** Germany fought alongside the Austrian Empire against the Allies (England, France, and Russia) from 1914 to 1918. Initially, Germany made gains by occupying parts of France and Belgium, but the war dragged on and exhausted Europe's resources.
- **Defeat and Abdication:** Germany was defeated in November 1918, leading to the abdication of the emperor. This defeat created an opportunity for parliamentary parties to reshape the German political system.
- **Formation of the Weimar Republic:** A National Assembly met in Weimar and established a democratic constitution. The new government allowed for equal and universal voting rights, including for women, to elect deputies to the German Parliament (Reichstag).
- **Challenges to the Republic:** The Weimar Republic faced significant opposition from the German people, who were dissatisfied due to the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles imposed after their defeat.
- **Treaty of Versailles:** The treaty was humiliating for Germany:
 - Lost overseas colonies.
 - Lost 13% of its territory, including land to France, Poland, Denmark, and Lithuania.
 - Lost 75% of its iron and 26% of its coal resources.
 - The War Guilt Clause held Germany responsible for the war, requiring them to pay £6 billion in compensation.
 - The Allied Powers occupied the resource-rich Rhineland throughout much of the 1920s.

- **Blame for the Weimar Republic:** Many Germans blamed the new Weimar Republic for both the defeat in the war and the disgraceful conditions of the Versailles Treaty.

1.1 The Effects of the War

- **Devastating Impact:** The war had serious psychological and financial effects across Europe, transforming it from a continent of creditors to one of debtors.
- **Burden on the Weimar Republic:** The new Weimar Republic had to deal with the consequences of the old empire's actions. It carried the burden of war guilt and humiliation, and was financially crippled by war reparations.
- **Target of Attacks:** Supporters of the Weimar Republic, including Socialists, Catholics, and Democrats, were mocked and labeled as “November criminals” by conservative nationalists.
- **Imprint on Society:** The First World War changed societal views, placing soldiers above civilians and promoting ideas of aggression and masculinity.
- **Glorification of War:** Media glorified life in the trenches, despite the harsh realities of disease, danger from poisonous gas, and high casualties.
- **Rise of Conservatism:** There was a growing support for conservative dictatorships, leading to instability in democracy, which was still a fragile concept in interwar Europe.

1.2 Political Radicalism and Economic Crises

- **Rise of the Weimar Republic:** The Weimar Republic was established during a time of political upheaval, marked by the Spartacist League's revolutionary uprising, inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.
- **Formation of Soviet-Style Governance:** Many cities established Soviets of workers and sailors, creating a demand for Soviet-style governance.
- **Opposition and Repression:** Socialists, Democrats, and Catholics opposed this uprising and met in Weimar to create a democratic republic. The Weimar government used the Free Corps, a veterans' organization, to crush the Spartacist uprising, leading to the formation of the Communist Party of Germany.
- **Divided Left:** The conflict between Communists and Socialists deepened, preventing them from uniting against rising threats like Hitler.
- **Economic Crisis of 1923:** Germany faced severe economic issues, having fought the war on loans and needing to pay reparations in gold, depleting its reserves.
- **Occupation of Ruhr:** When Germany refused to pay reparations, France occupied the Ruhr, its industrial heartland. Germany's passive resistance led to reckless printing of money.
- **Hyperinflation:** Excess money led to hyperinflation, with the value of the German mark plummeting. Prices skyrocketed, leading to images of Germans carrying large amounts of cash just to buy basic goods.
- **Dawes Plan:** The crisis drew international attention, and the U.S. intervened by introducing the Dawes Plan, which restructured reparations to ease Germany's financial burden.

1.3 The Years of Depression

- **Short-lived Stability (1924-1928):** After some stability, Germany's economic recovery relied heavily on short-term loans from the USA.

- **Wall Street Crash (1929):** When the Wall Street Exchange crashed, American support was withdrawn, leading to the Great Economic Depression. On October 24, 1929, 13 million shares were sold in a panic.
- **Global Recession:** Between 1929 and 1932, the U.S. national income halved. Factories closed, exports fell, and farmers struggled, causing worldwide economic distress.
- **Impact on Germany:** Germany was hit hardest. By 1932, industrial production dropped to 40% of the 1929 level, and unemployment soared to 6 million.
- **Visible Despair:** Unemployed individuals roamed the streets, many with placards saying, "Willing to do any work." Young people engaged in petty crime or waited in long lines at job centers.
- **Economic Anxiety:** The middle class saw their savings diminish as currency lost value. Small businesses collapsed, and many feared becoming part of the working class or unemployed.
- **Fragile Weimar Republic:** The Weimar government faced instability due to its proportional representation system, leading to coalition governments and frequent changes in leadership (twenty cabinets in its short life).
- **Abuse of Article 48:** Article 48 allowed the President to impose emergency measures, which weakened civil rights. The public lost faith in the democratic system as it struggled to address the crises.

2. Hitler's Rise to Power

Background of Crisis: The economic, political, and social crises in Germany created a fertile ground for Hitler's rise.

Early Life:

- Born in 1889 in Austria, Hitler experienced poverty in his youth.
- He served in the German army during World War I, starting as a messenger, later becoming a corporal, and earning medals for bravery.

Reaction to Defeat:

- Hitler was horrified by Germany's defeat in WWI.
- The harsh terms of the Versailles Treaty infuriated him and fueled his desire for revenge and restoration.

Joining Politics:

- In 1919, he joined the German Workers' Party, a small political group.
- He later took control of this party and renamed it the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazi Party).

Early Ambitions:

- In 1923, Hitler attempted to seize control in Bavaria, aiming to march to Berlin.
- This coup, known as the Beer Hall Putsch, failed, leading to his arrest and a treason trial. He was eventually released.

Initial Struggles:

- For several years, the Nazi Party struggled to gain widespread support.
- It wasn't until the onset of the Great Depression in the late 1920s that their influence began to grow significantly.

The Great Depression:

- The economic crisis led to massive bank failures, widespread business closures, and soaring unemployment.
- The middle class faced the threat of losing their livelihoods, creating a climate of fear and desperation.

Nazi Propaganda:

- In this unstable environment, Nazi propaganda promised a better future, tapping into the public's hopes and fears.
- In the 1928 elections, the Nazis received only 2.6% of the votes in the Reichstag (the German parliament).
- By 1932, they became the largest party, winning 37% of the votes.

Hitler's Charisma:

- Hitler was a powerful and passionate speaker, able to inspire and move the masses.
- He made promises to rebuild Germany, overturn the Versailles Treaty, restore national pride, provide jobs, and secure a future for the youth.
- He framed the Nazis as defenders against foreign threats and conspiracies.

New Political Style:

- Hitler understood the importance of public spectacle in politics.
- The Nazis organized massive rallies, public meetings, and used symbols like red banners with the Swastika and the Nazi salute to create a sense of unity and power.
- Rituals such as enthusiastic applause after speeches enhanced the spectacle.

Hitler as a Saviour:

- Propaganda portrayed Hitler as a messiah, someone destined to rescue Germany from its crises.
- This image resonated deeply with people whose dignity and pride had been undermined, making them more receptive to Nazi ideology.

2.1 The Destruction of Democracy in Germany (1933)

- **Rise of Hitler:** On January 30, 1933, Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany by President Hindenburg. Once in power, he quickly moved to dismantle democratic institutions.
- **The Fire Decree:** In February 1933, a fire broke out in the German Parliament (Reichstag), which Hitler used as a pretext to restrict civil rights. The Fire Decree, passed on February 28, suspended freedoms of speech, press, and assembly indefinitely.
- **Targeting Communists:** Hitler's government began persecuting Communists, sending many to concentration camps. In cities like Duesseldorf, a significant number of arrests targeted Communists, but overall, Nazis persecuted 52 different groups across Germany.
- **The Enabling Act:** On March 3, 1933, the Enabling Act was passed, allowing Hitler to bypass Parliament and rule by decree. This law established his dictatorship, banning all political parties and trade unions except for the Nazi Party.

- **Control Over Society:** The Nazi state took control of the economy, media, military, and judiciary. Special security forces were created, including the Gestapo (secret police), SS (protection squads), and the SD (security service). These groups operated outside legal limits, allowing them to detain, torture, and deport individuals without legal procedures. This made Nazi Germany a feared authoritarian state.

2.2 Reconstruction and World War II Under Hitler

- **Economic Recovery:** Hitler tasked economist Hjalmar Schacht with restoring Germany's economy. Schacht promoted full production and employment through state-funded projects like building superhighways and the Volkswagen.
- **Foreign Policy Successes:** Hitler quickly made aggressive moves in foreign policy. Germany left the League of Nations in 1933, reoccupied the Rhineland in 1936, and annexed Austria in 1938 under the slogan "One people, One empire, One leader." He then took control of German-speaking regions in Czechoslovakia. England did not intervene, believing the Treaty of Versailles had been too harsh on Germany.
- **Preparation for War:** Despite Schacht's warning against overspending on military rearmament, Hitler pursued military expansion to solve economic issues. In September 1939, Germany invaded Poland, leading to war with France and England. By September 1940, Germany, Italy, and Japan signed the Tripartite Pact, solidifying their alliance.
- **Expansion into Eastern Europe:** Hitler aimed to secure food and territory in Eastern Europe. In 1941, he invaded the Soviet Union but suffered heavy losses. The Soviet Red Army defeated Germany at the Battle of Stalingrad, pushing German forces back to Berlin, where the Soviets eventually established control over Eastern Europe.
- **US Enters the War:** The United States initially avoided joining the war but entered after Japan, an ally of Germany, attacked the US naval base at Pearl Harbor in 1941. The war ended in May 1945, with Hitler's defeat in Europe and the US dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan.

This marked the end of World War II and exposed the extensive criminal activities committed by the Nazis during the war.

3. The Nazi Worldview

- **Racial Hierarchy:** Nazi ideology, closely tied to Hitler's beliefs, promoted a racial hierarchy. According to this, Nordic Aryans (blond, blue-eyed Germans) were at the top, while Jews were considered the lowest, labeled as an "anti-race." Other races were ranked in between based on physical traits.
- **Influence of Darwin and Spencer:** Nazis misused Darwin's theory of evolution and Herbert Spencer's concept of "survival of the fittest" to justify racism. They argued that the "strongest" race would survive, leading them to believe Aryans should dominate and eliminate "weaker" races.
- **Lebensraum (Living Space):** Hitler's expansionist ideology, Lebensraum, aimed to acquire more land to provide space for Germans. He wanted to extend German territory eastward, bringing all Germans together in one place and increasing Germany's resources and power.
- **Experimentation in Poland:** Poland became the first region where Hitler tested his ideas of racial purity and territorial expansion, using it as a laboratory for his policies.

3.1 Establishment of the Racial State under Nazi Rule

- **Creation of a 'Pure' German Community:** Once in power, Nazis worked to establish a "racially pure" society of Nordic Aryans by eliminating groups they saw as "undesirable." Only "pure" Aryans were allowed to thrive, while others were considered unworthy of life.
- **Euthanasia Program:** This program targeted Germans deemed mentally or physically unfit, condemning many to death as part of Hitler's vision of a racially healthy state.
- **Persecution of Minorities:** Nazis targeted Jews, Gypsies, Blacks, Russians, and Poles as racial "inferiors." Many were forced into slave labor, suffering from starvation and overwork, particularly in occupied Poland and Russia.
- **Hatred and Violence Against Jews:** Nazi anti-Semitism was deeply rooted in historical Christian prejudice but was intensified by pseudoscientific racial theories that called for the complete elimination of Jews. Jews were segregated, forced out of jobs, and eventually deported.
- **The Holocaust (1939-1945):** From 1939 onward, Nazis forced Jews into ghettos and later transported them to concentration and extermination camps. Millions were killed, particularly in gas chambers in Poland, marking one of history's darkest genocides.

3.2 The Racial Utopia under Nazi Rule

- **Genocide and War:** The Nazis' vision of a "racially pure" empire led to mass genocide alongside the war. Occupied Poland was divided, with parts annexed by Germany and ethnic Germans resettled there.
- **Displacement of Poles:** Poles were forcibly removed from their homes and properties. They were sent to the "General Government" area, designated for all "undesirables" within Nazi-controlled regions.
- **Suppression of Polish Intelligentsia:** Polish intellectuals and leaders were killed to weaken the spirit of the Polish people and maintain control.
- **Kidnapping of Polish Children:** Children with Aryan features were taken from their families to be raised in German households. Those who didn't meet "racial" standards were sent to orphanages, where many died.
- **Ghettos and Gas Chambers:** The General Government area became a major site for the persecution and mass killing of Jews, with large ghettos and gas chambers used in the systematic genocide.

Steps to Death: Stage 1 - Exclusion (1933-1939)

- **Nuremberg Laws (1935):** These laws restricted Jewish rights, declaring:
 - Only those of German or related blood were German citizens.
 - Marriages and relationships between Jews and Germans were forbidden.
 - Jews could not fly the German flag.
- **Other Measures:**
 - Boycott of Jewish businesses.
 - Jews were expelled from government jobs.
 - Forced sale and confiscation of Jewish property.
- **"Night of Broken Glass" (Kristallnacht, November 1938):** Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues were attacked and vandalized. Many Jewish men were arrested in this violent pogrom, marking an escalation in Nazi persecution.

Steps to Death: Stage 2 - Ghettoisation (1940-1944)

- **Identification:** From September 1941, Jews were forced to wear a yellow Star of David on their clothes and have it on all legal documents and their homes.
- **Forced Relocation:** Jews were confined to overcrowded ghettos, such as those in Lodz and Warsaw.
- **Extreme Hardship:** Ghettos were marked by severe poverty, hunger, and disease due to poor hygiene and deprivation. Jews had to give up all their belongings before entering, and conditions led to widespread suffering and death.

Steps to Death: Stage 3 - Annihilation (1941 Onwards)

- **Mass Deportation:** Jews from ghettos, concentration camps, and other parts of Europe were transported by train to death camps.
- **Death Camps:** Major camps like Auschwitz, Treblinka, Sobibor, and Belzec in Poland used gas chambers to carry out mass executions within minutes.
- **Systematic Execution:** Killings were conducted with horrifying efficiency, aimed at the complete annihilation of the Jewish population.

4. Youth in Nazi Germany

4.1 Nazi Control Over Youth and Education

- **School Changes:** Nazi ideology dominated schools. Jewish teachers and those seen as “unreliable” were dismissed. Jewish, disabled, and Gypsy children were expelled and later sent to gas chambers in the 1940s.
- **Ideological Curriculum:** “Good German” children underwent Nazi schooling, with textbooks rewritten to promote Nazi racial ideas. Subjects like racial science and math spread anti-Jewish stereotypes. Sports were used to instill violence and aggression, with a focus on making boys “strong and masculine.”
- **Youth Organizations:** All other youth groups were banned, leaving only Nazi-controlled organizations. Boys joined Jungvolk at 10 and Hitler Youth at 14, where they were trained to glorify war, hate “undesirables,” and reject democracy. At 18, they joined the Labour Service, military, or Nazi groups.
- **Hitler Youth:** Established in 1922 and renamed in 1926, Hitler Youth became central to unifying and controlling German youth under Nazi beliefs.

4.1 The Nazi Cult of Motherhood

- **Role of Women:** Women in Nazi Germany were taught to be different from men, focusing on being good mothers and raising “pure” Aryan children. They were to stay away from Jews, care for the home, and pass on Nazi values to their children.
- **Encouragement and Rewards:** Women who had “racially desirable” children were rewarded with special treatment in hospitals, discounts, and Honor Crosses for large families (bronze for 4 children, silver for 6, gold for 8 or more).
- **Punishment for “Deviations”:** Women who associated with Jews, Poles, or Russians were publicly humiliated and punished. They were paraded with shaved heads, blackened faces, and signs labeling them as traitors, often losing their civic rights, family, and respect.

4.2 The Art of Propaganda in Nazi Germany

- **Deceptive Language:** The Nazis avoided using words like “kill” or “murder” in official communications. Instead, they used terms like “special treatment,” “final solution,” “euthanasia,” and “disinfection” to disguise their actions. Gas chambers were misleadingly labeled as “disinfection-areas.”
- **Media Manipulation:** The regime effectively used media to spread its ideology and gain public support. They utilized visual images, films, radio, posters, and slogans to convey their messages.
- **Stereotyping Enemies:** The Nazis portrayed groups they deemed “enemies,” such as socialists and Jews, in a negative light. They were depicted as weak, degenerate, and malicious, often using mocking and abusive imagery.
- **Propaganda Films:** Films like *The Eternal Jew* created hatred against Jews by portraying them with harmful stereotypes, comparing them to vermin and rodents, despite the fact that many Jews in Germany were well assimilated.
- **Emotional Manipulation:** Nazi propaganda tapped into the emotions of the population, channeling their anger and hatred toward those labeled as “undesirable.”
- **Broad Appeal:** The Nazis aimed to win support from all social classes by claiming they alone could solve the problems facing the country.

5. Ordinary People and the Crimes Against Humanity

Reactions of Common People to Nazism

- **Acceptance and Hatred:** Many Germans adopted Nazi beliefs and language, feeling hatred towards anyone who appeared Jewish. They actively reported Jewish neighbors and marked their houses, believing Nazism would lead to prosperity.
- **Resistance:** Not all Germans supported Nazism. Some organized resistance against the regime, risking their lives in defiance of police repression.
- **Apathy and Silence:** The majority of people were passive bystanders. They were scared to act or speak out against the regime, choosing to ignore the injustices happening around them. Pastor Niemoeller noted this silence, expressing regret for not speaking out against the persecution of various groups.
- **Jewish Experience:** For Jews, the situation was dire. Charlotte Beradt recorded their dreams in her book *The Third Reich of Dreams*, showing that many Jews internalized Nazi stereotypes. They dreamed about their perceived physical traits, reflecting the impact of propaganda on their self-image. This psychological torment contributed to their suffering, even before they faced physical violence or death.

5.1 Knowledge about the Holocaust

- **Post-War Realization:** After World War II, the true extent of Nazi atrocities, known as the Holocaust, became known to the world. While Germany dealt with its defeat, the Jewish community sought to ensure that the horrors they experienced were remembered.
- **Desire to Bear Witness:** Many Holocaust survivors expressed a strong desire to tell their stories. One ghetto inhabitant hoped to survive the war just long enough to share what had happened. This determination led many to keep diaries and records of their experiences.
- **Nazi Efforts to Destroy Evidence:** As the war turned against them, Nazi leaders attempted to erase evidence of their crimes, distributing petrol to destroy incriminating documents.
- **Enduring Legacy:** Today, the memory of the Holocaust is preserved through memoirs, fiction, documentaries, poetry, memorials, and museums. These serve as tributes to those who resisted, reminders of those who collaborated, and warnings to those who remained silent.