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2 Hitler's Rise to Power

This crisis in the economy, polity and society formed the background to Hitler's rise to power. Born in 1889 in Austria, Hitler spent his youth in poverty. When the First World War broke out, he enrolled for the army, acted as a messenger in the front, became a corporal, and earned medals for bravery. The German defeat horrified him and the Versailles Treaty made him furious. In 1919, he joined a small group called the German Workers' Party. He subsequently took over the organisation and renamed it the National Socialist German Workers' Party. This party came to be known as the Nazi Party.

In 1923, Hitler planned to seize control of Bavaria, march to Berlin and capture power. He failed, was arrested, tried for treason, and later released. The Nazis could not effectively mobilise popular support till the early 1930s. It was during the Great Depression that Nazism became a mass movement. As we have seen, after 1929, banks collapsed and businesses shut down, workers lost their jobs and the middle classes were threatened with destitution. In such a situation Nazi **propaganda** stirred hopes of a better future. In 1928, the Nazi Party got no more than 2.6 per cent votes in the Reichstag – the German parliament. By 1932, it had become the largest party with 37 per cent votes.



Fig. 7 – Hitler being greeted at the Party Congress in Nuremberg in 1938.

New words

Propaganda – Specific type directly aimed at influencing of people (through the use of speeches, etc.)



Fig.8 – Nuremberg Rally, 1936. Rallies like this were held every year. An important aspect of these was the demonstration of Nazi power as various organisations paraded past Hitler, swore loyalty and listened to his speeches.

Hitler was a powerful speaker. His passion and his words moved people. He promised to build a strong nation, undo the injustice of the Versailles Treaty and restore the dignity of the German people. He promised employment for those looking for work, and a secure future for the youth. He promised to weed out all foreign influences and resist all foreign 'conspiracies' against Germany.

Hitler devised a new style of politics. He understood the significance of rituals and spectacle in mass mobilisation. Nazis held massive rallies

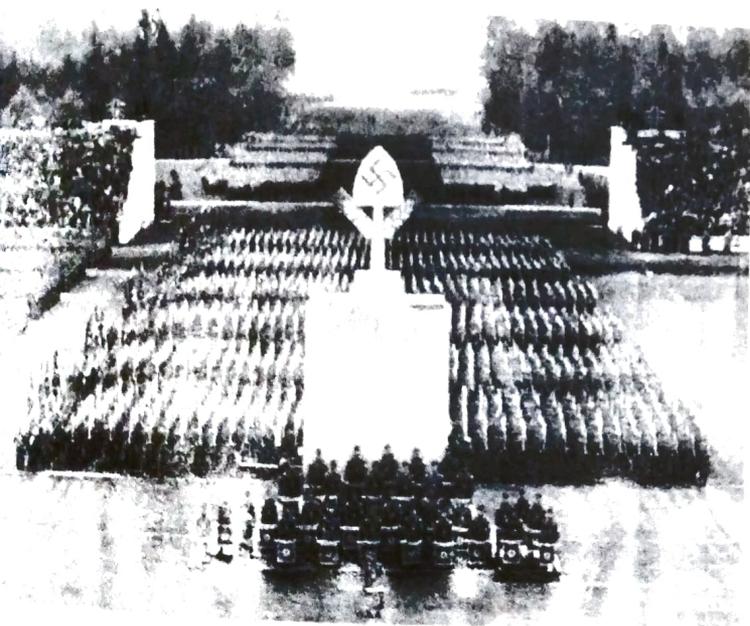


Fig.9 – Hitler addressing SA and SS columns. Notice the sweeping and straight columns of people. Such photographs were intended to show the grandeur and power of the Nazi movement

and public meetings to demonstrate the support for Hitler and instil a sense of unity among the people. The Red banners with the swastika, the Nazi salute, and the ritualised rounds of applause after speeches were all part of this spectacle of power.

Nazi propaganda skilfully projected Hitler as a messiah, a saviour, as someone who had arrived to deliver people from their distress. It is an image that captured the imagination of a people whose sense of dignity and pride had been shattered, and who were living in a time of acute economic and political crises.

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2.1 The Destruction of Democracy

On 30 January 1933, President Hindenburg offered the Chancellorship, the highest position in the cabinet of ministers, to Hitler. By now the Nazis had managed to rally the conservatives to their cause. Having acquired power, Hitler set out to dismantle the structures of democratic rule. A mysterious fire that broke out in the German Parliament building in February facilitated his move. The Fire Decree of 28 February 1933 indefinitely suspended civic rights like freedom of speech, press and assembly that had been guaranteed by the Weimar constitution. Then he turned on his arch-enemies, the Communists, most of whom were hurriedly packed off to the newly established **concentration camps**. The repression of the Communists was severe. Out of the surviving 6,808 arrest files of Duesseldorf, a small city of half a million population, 1,440 were those of Communists alone. They were, however, only one among the 52 types of victims persecuted by the Nazis across the country.

On 3 March 1933, the famous Enabling Act was passed. This Act established dictatorship in Germany. It gave Hitler all powers to sideline Parliament and rule by decree. All political parties and trade unions were banned except for the Nazi Party and its affiliates. The state established complete control over the economy, media, army and judiciary.

Special surveillance and security forces were created to control and order society in ways that the Nazis wanted. Apart from the already existing regular police in green uniform and the SA or the Storm Troopers, these included the Gestapo (secret state police), the SS (the protection squads), criminal police and the Security Service (SD). It was the extra-constitutional powers of these newly created forces

Nazism and the Rise of Hitler

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1) The Nazi Party had become the largest party by the

A 1932

2) Hitler became the chancellor of Germany in the year

A 1933

3) The time span of the First World War was

A 1914 - 1918