

How the Nazis took power, Part 2 of 3: Hitler becomes Chancellor

Warm-up:

1. List 3 things you know about the Great Depression.
2. Group discussion: When there is a downturn in the economy, what kinds of effects can this have on you and your family, friends and neighbours?

With the coming of the **Great Depression**, Germany and the whole world were plunged into crisis. The United States began to call in all its foreign loans. In a few months, unemployment in Germany rose from **1.25 million to 4 million**. Wages fell.

Hitler and the Nazi leaders travelled all over Germany. In rural areas they promised tax cuts for farmers. In working-class areas they promised to tackle high profits and redistribute wealth. When they spoke to wealthy industrialists, often in closed meetings, they promised to destroy communism and the trade union movement, which contradicted their promises to working-class people.

But their supporters were overwhelmingly rural and middle-class people, particularly those harmed by the Great Depression. As the Depression went on they gathered more support from unemployed workers. At this time the Nazi party had very few supporters in the factories. But they controlled the entire students' union movement all across the country.

Hitler called for an end to democracy, which he described in 1932 as '**rule of stupidity, of mediocrity, of half-heartedness, of cowardice, of weakness, and of inadequacy.**' This chimed with people who had lost faith in politicians. In the election of **September 1930**, nearly a year after the crash, the Nazi Party went **from 12 seats to 107**, making them the second-largest party in the Reichstag. Their vote rose from 800,000 to over 6 million.

1932 Presidential Election

By cutting unemployment benefits and state salaries, the government of **Heinrich Brüning, the 'Hunger Chancellor,'** made things worse. He ruled by emergency decrees from **President Paul Von Hindenburg**, a famous general from World War One who was now 83 years old.

In 1932 Hitler ran for president against Hindenburg, who was supported by the social democrats, the People's Party and the State Party. The communists also ran a candidate, Ernst Thälmann. Hitler **came second**, raising his profile by rallying anti-establishment anger against Hindenburg. The social democrats had played into his hands by supporting an ancient right-wing military officer instead of running someone who would inspire the people and promise change.

Street violence

Meanwhile the Nazis were winning a physical battle for the streets of Germany. The **Nazi Stormtroopers** would engage in fierce hand-to-hand combat against the communist **Red Front-Fighters' League** and **Anti-**

Fascist Action. The social democrats, meanwhile, had a similar physical force wing called the **Reichsbanner** and the nationalists had one called the **Steel Helmets**. The various groups would fight each other for control of towns, neighbourhoods and streets. The violence led to court cases and prison sentences. But the judges went very easy on Nazis and very harsh on communists.

In **'Bloody May' 1929**, the social democrat-controlled police in Berlin killed **33 supporters of the Communist Party** over three days of rioting (one police officer was injured). This intensified the Communists' opposition to the social democrats and made cooperation almost impossible. It didn't help that at this time, the Communist strategy worldwide was to refuse to cooperate with others on the left.

In 1930 two Communist Party members killed **a young Stormtrooper named Horst Wessel**. The **Nazi propaganda leader Josef Goebbels** turned Horst Wessel into a martyr and he was celebrated through the singing of the **'Horst Wessel Song'** by Stormtroopers.

By 1932 there were 400,000 Stormtroopers. This meant the Nazis had an army four times bigger than the German army! They had indisputably won the battle for the streets of Germany. Now the Stormtroopers dominated all public spaces, constantly beating up and harassing Jews and political opponents.

The Nazis are handed power

The Nazis had always had wealthy backers, including **Thyssen**, the owner of one of the biggest steel companies in Germany. But in the early 1930s more and more wealthy people gave their backing to the Nazis, as they feared a communist revolution due to the crisis the country was in. They hoped that the Stormtroopers could stop the communists and socialists, and put an end to strikes and protests.

But the right-wing parties did not yet unite behind Hitler. They preferred **Franz Von Papen**, the leader of the **Catholic Centre Party**, and made him chancellor in **1932**. He removed a ban on the Stormtroopers that had been in force for a short time, leading to a spike in violence in which 86 people were killed. Von Papen also called an election in which the **Nazis increased their seats to 230**.

But the Nazis were in danger of overplaying their hand. In one incident in Silesia, Stormtroopers poked a communist's eyes out with a billiard cue and then stabbed him to death in front of his mother. Hitler sent a letter of support to the four men arrested for this crime. Meanwhile in the Reichstag, the Nazi MPs beat up the Communist MPs in a bloody brawl.

In a second election held in **1932**, the Nazi party lost seats **(from 230 to 196)**. Now the Social Democrats and the Communists had more seats than the Nazis. Many believed that the Nazis had begun to decline. But the right wing and the wealthy were afraid of revolution, and now they agreed to get behind Hitler. In **January 1933 Franz Von Papen and Hitler** held a meeting and agreed to cooperate. President Hindenburg reluctantly appointed Hitler as **Chancellor of Germany**.

Hindenburg believed that it was a temporary retreat and that soon the Nazis would be forced out of power again. But Hitler and the Nazis would only tighten their grip and stay in power for many years.

1. **List the 3 most important things which helped Hitler and the Nazis come to power, and explain your answers.**
2. **List 2 other political parties or politicians in Germany at the time, besides the Nazis, and write one sentence about each one.**