The NSDAP and Totalitarian Rule

In the July 1932 parliamentary elections, the NSDAP captured 37 percent of the vote — the largest total that any party had received thus far under the Weimar system. As the largest party in the Reichstag, the NSDAP chose Hermann Goering, a war hero and a close associate of Hitler, as the presiding officer of the legislature. Although Germany was still being governed through presidential decrees that excluded the Reichstag, President Hindenburg’s advisers recognized that the NSDAP would have to be brought into the government in some capacity.

Hitler initially maintained that he was entitled to nothing less than the chancellorship and complete control over the government. Results from parliamentary elections in November 1932, however, nudged Hitler toward compromise. The NSDAP’s share of the vote dropped to 33 percent, raising fears in the Nazi leadership that support for the NSDAP had already peaked.

The November 1932 elections also convinced many of Hindenburg’s advisers that Hitler was a passing figure on the political stage. They now favored appointing Hitler as chancellor, arguing that the Nazi leader could be tamed by surrounding him with responsible conservative ministers. Likewise, they expected that Hitler’s supporters would be transformed into the foundation of a restructured, conservative government. Many of Hindenburg’s advisers belonged to the DNVP and, in fact, had never been deeply committed to the Weimar system. Leaders of the Center, who had become increasingly conservative, and the nationalist Suhlhelm war veterans organization also backed the decision. After intense behind-the-scenes negotiations, Hindenburg named Hitler chancellor on January 30, 1933.

On the night of February 27, 1933, the Reichstag building was destroyed by fire. Hitler claimed that the communists had set the fire as part of a plot to overthrow the government and trigger a civil war. In line with Hitler’s accusations, the police charged a Dutch communist with igniting the blaze. Many Germans, however, suspected that the Nazis themselves had started the fire to justify a political crackdown.

The day after the destruction of the Reichstag, Hitler proclaimed a national emergency and suspended most of the political rights guaranteed in the Weimar Constitution, including freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly. The KPD was, in effect, outlawed and the SPD intimidated.

In the Reichstag elections that took place the following week, the NSDAP increased its share of the vote to 44 percent. Despite the curtailment of political activity prior to the election, the SPD received 18 percent of the vote and the KPD polled more than 12 percent. The Center captured 14 percent of the vote. In coalition with other ultra-nationalist parties, the Nazis controlled a majority of votes in the parliament.

With the emergency decrees issued after the Reichstag fire and bolstered by his election success, Hitler wriggled free of the political constraints imposed by the constitution. In late March, Hitler won passage of legislation in the Reichstag that enabled his cabinet to enact new laws without the approval of the parliament or the president. The measure gave Hitler the legal means to dismantle the Weimar system.

In the coming months, Hitler set out to establish a totalitarian dictatorship. The political opponents of the Nazis were smashed and loyal NSDAP members were placed in key government positions. The conservatives who imagined that they could manipulate Hitler were themselves pushed out of the government. Hitler extended Nazi control to all aspects of German society, including the schools, the military, the press, the churches, and even the arts. When the ailing President Hindenburg died on August 2, 1934, Hitler claimed the title of president and declared himself the Fuehrer of the German nation. The dictatorship was now complete.

Hitler and his party enjoyed popular support throughout the rest of the 1930s. His economic policies did, in fact, significantly reduce unemployment. In addition, Hitler’s foreign policies — the reoccupation of the Rhineland, his rejection of the Versailles Treaty’s restrictions on the German military, and the annexation of Austria in 1938 — restored for many Germans their sense of national pride.
In the following two pages, you will have an opportunity to examine the laws and speeches that provided the legal and ideological underpinnings of the totalitarian Nazi regime.

**Orders to Prussian Police, February 17, 1933 (issued by Hermann Goering)**

I expect all police authorities to maintain the best relations with these organizations [S.A. and Stahlhelm, the ultra-nationalist veterans organization] that comprise the most important constructive forces of the state... The activities of subversive organizations are on the contrary to be combated with the most drastic methods. Communist terrorist acts and attacks are to be countered with all severity, and weapons must be used ruthlessly if necessary... Every official must constantly bear in mind that failure to act is more serious than errors committed in acting.

**Enabling Law, March 24, 1933**

(This critical legislation passed with a two-thirds majority of the Reichstag. The Center Party voted for granting dictatorial powers to Hitler's government. Since the KPD was now outlawed, only the SPD voted against the measure.)

National laws can be enacted by the National Cabinet [Hitler and his ministers] as well as in accordance with the procedure established in the Constitution... The national laws enacted by the National Cabinet may deviate from the Constitution so far as they do not affect the position of the Reichstag and National Council. The powers of the President remain undisturbed.

**Law for the Restoration of the Civil Service, April 7, 1933**

Officials of non-Aryan descent [primarily Jews] are to be retired. Those who have honorary status are also to be dismissed... Those officials who have indicated by their previous political activity that they may not exert themselves for the national state without reservation may be dismissed.

**Speech by Dr. Joseph Goebbels, Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, at Mass Book Burning, May 10, 1933**

You have done well in the middle of the night to throw into the flames these unspiritual relics of the past. It is a strong, great, and symbolic performance that should document for all the world that here, tonight, the spiritual foundations of the November [Weimar] Republic sink to the ground. But out of these ruins there will arise the phoenix of a new spirit, a spirit that we bear, that we demand, a spirit on which we have stamped its decisive character and its decisive features. So I beg you, my fellow students, to stand up for the Reich and for its new authorities. So I beg you to dedicate yourselves to the work and duty and banners of responsibility.

(Thousands of students in coordinated demonstrations organized by the NSDAP in over thirty university towns burned books by Albert Einstein, H.G. Wells, Jack London, Erich Maria Remarque, Sigmund Freud, Thomas Mann, Upton Sinclair, Karl Marx, and other writers whose works were considered “un-German.”)

**Decree for the Coordination of All Activities, June 30, 1933**

... all of the following are transferred to the jurisdiction of the Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda [Joseph Goebbels]:... general public enlightenment on the domestic scene, the Academy of Politics, setting up and celebrating national holidays and state ceremonies... the press, the radio, the German Library in Leipzig, art, music, including philharmonic orchestras, theater, cinema...

**Law Concerning the Formation of New Parties, July 14, 1933**

The National Socialist German Workers’ Party is the only political party in Germany. Anyone who seeks to maintain the organization of another political party or to organize a new political party is to be punished by confinement in a jail.
Law for the Protection of Hereditary Health, July 14, 1933

Anyone who suffers from an inheritable disease may be sterilized surgically if, in the judgment of medical science, it could be expected that his descendants will suffer from serious inherited mental or physical defects....Sterilization may also be recommended by 1) the official physician, 2) the official in charge of a hospital, sanitarium, or prison....The proceedings of the Health Inheritance Courts are secret.

Law to Promote National Labor, January 20, 1934

A labor trustee will be appointed for every large industrial area. It will be the duty of this officer to promote the maintenance of industrial peace....Each member of a working community is responsible for the conscientious performance of the duties entailed by his position in that community. His conduct must be such as to deserve the consideration attached to his position, and in particular he must be constantly mindful of his duty to devote his energies wholeheartedly to the services of the undertaking and to subordinate himself to the general good.

Law for the Reorganization of the Reich, January 30, 1934

The popular assemblies of the individual states are hereby abolished. The sovereign rights of individual states are hereby transferred to the Reich. The governments of the individual states are to be subordinate to the Reich government....The Reich government may draw up new constitutional laws.

Armed Forces Oath of Personal Loyalty, August 2, 1934

I swear before God this holy oath: that I shall give absolute obedience to the Führer of the German Reich and people, Adolf Hitler, the Supreme Commander of the Wehrmacht [army], and as a courageous soldier will be ready at all times to lay down my life for this oath.


All young Germans of both sexes are obligated to serve their country in the Reich Labor Service. It is the purpose of the Reich Labor Service to educate German youth in the spirit of National Socialism so that they may obtain a true national community sentiment, a free conception of labor, and above all, a due respect for manual work.

Nuremberg Laws on Citizenship and Race, September 15, 1935

A citizen of the Reich may be only one who is of German or kindred blood, and who, through his behavior, shows that he is both desirous and personally fit to serve loyally the German people and the Reich....Only a citizen of the Reich may enjoy full political rights in consonance with the provisions of the laws.

Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor, September 15, 1935

Any marriages between Jews and citizens of German or kindred blood are herewith forbidden....Extramarital relations between Jews and citizens of German or kindred blood are herewith forbidden....Jews are forbidden to employ as servants in their households female subjects of German or kindred blood who are under the age of forty-five years. Jews are forbidden from displaying the Reich and national flag and from showing the national colors.

Supplementary Decree on Citizenship, November 14, 1935

A Jew cannot be a citizen of the Reich. He cannot exercise the right to vote; he cannot occupy public office. Jewish officials [government employees] will be retired as of December 31, 1935....A Jew is an individual who is descended from at least three grandparents who were racially full Jews....A Jew is also an individual who is descended from two full Jewish grandparents if...[four specific conditions are met].