

A 'REVOLUTION OF DESTRUCTION'?

The Nazi assault on the Jews in the first months of 1933 was the first step in a longer-term process of removing them from German society. By the summer of 1933 this process was well under way. It was the core of Hitler's cultural revolution, the key, in the Nazi mind, to the wider cultural transformation of Germany that was to purge the German spirit of 'alien' influences such as communism, Marxism, socialism, liberalism, pacifism, conservatism, artistic experimentation, sexual freedom and much more besides. All of these influences were ascribed by the Nazis to the malign influence of the Jews, despite massive evidence to the contrary. Excluding the Jews from the economy, from the media, from state employment and from the professions was thus an essential part of the process of redeeming and purifying the German race, and preparing it to wreak its revenge on those who had humiliated it in 1918. When Hitler and Goebbels talked that summer of the 'National Socialist Revolution', this was in the first place what they meant: a cultural and spiritual revolution in which all things 'un-German' had been ruthlessly suppressed.

Yet the extraordinary speed with which this transformation had been achieved suggested at the same time powerful continuities with the recent past. Between 30 January and 14 July 1933, after all, the Nazis had translated Hitler's Chancellorship in a coalition government dominated by non-Nazi conservatives into a one-party state in which even the conservatives no longer had any separate representation. They had coordinated all social institutions, apart from the Churches and the army, into a vast and still inchoate structure run by themselves. They had purged huge swathes of culture and the arts, the universities and the educational system, and almost every other area of German society, of everyone who was opposed to them. They had begun their drive to push out the Jews onto the margins of society, or force them to emigrate. And they were starting to put in place the laws and policies that would determine the fate of Germany and its people, and more besides, over the coming years. Some had imagined that the coalition installed on 30 January 1933 would fall apart like other coalitions before it, within a few months. Others had written off the Nazis as a transient phenomenon that would quickly disappear from the stage of world history together with the capitalist system that had put them in power. All of them had been proved wrong. The Third Reich had come into being by the summer of 1933, and it was clearly there to stay. How, then, did this revolution occur? Why did the Nazis meet with no effective opposition in their seizure of power?

The coming of the Third Reich essentially happened in

two phases. The first ended with Hitler's nomination as Reich Chancellor on 30 January 1933. This was no 'seizure of power'. Indeed, the Nazis themselves did not use this term to describe the appointment, since it smacked of an illegal putsch. They were still careful at this stage to refer to an 'assumption of power' and to call the coalition a 'government of national renewal' or, more generally, a government of 'national uprising', depending on whether they wished to stress the legitimacy of the cabinet's appointment by the President or the legitimacy of its supposed backing by the nation.¹¹⁸ The Nazis knew that Hitler's appointment was the beginning of the process of conquering power, not the end. Nevertheless, had it not happened, the Nazi Party might well have continued to decline as the economy gradually recovered. Had Schleicher been less politically incompetent, he might have established a quasi-military regime, ruling through President Hindenburg's power of decree and then, when Hindenburg, who was in his late eighties, eventually died, ruling in his own right, possibly with a revised constitution still giving a role of sorts to the Reichstag. By the second half of 1932, a military regime of some description was the only viable alternative to a Nazi dictatorship. The slide away from parliamentary democracy into an authoritarian state ruling without the full and equal participation of the parties or the legislatures had already begun under Brüning. It had been massively and deliberately accelerated by Papen. After Papen, there was no going back. A power vacuum had been created in Germany which the Reichstag and the parties had no chance of filling. Political power had seeped away from the legitimate organs of the constitution onto the streets at one end, and into the small cabal of politicians and generals surrounding President Hindenburg at the other, leaving a vacuum in the vast area between, where normal democratic politics take place. Hitler was put into office by a clique around the President; but they would not have felt it necessary to put him there without the violence and disorder generated by the activities of the Nazis and the Communists on the streets.¹¹⁹

In such a situation, only force was likely to succeed. Only two institutions possessed it in sufficient measure. Only two institutions could operate it without arousing even more violent reactions on the part of the mass of the population: the army and the Nazi movement. A military dictatorship would most probably have crushed many civil freedoms in the years after 1933, launched a drive for rearmament, repudiated the Treaty of Versailles, annexed Austria and invaded Poland in order to recover Danzig and the Polish Corridor that separated East Prussia from the rest of Germany. It might well have used the recovery of German power to pursue further international aggression leading to a war with Britain and France, or the Soviet Union, or both. It would almost certainly have imposed severe restrictions on the Jews. But it is unlikely on balance that a military dictatorship in Germany would have launched the kind of

genocidal programme that found its culmination in the gas chambers of Auschwitz and Treblinka.^{[120](#)}

A military putsch could, as many feared, have led to violent resistance by the Nazis as well as the Communists. Restoring order would have caused massive bloodshed, leading perhaps to civil war. The army was as anxious to avoid this as the Nazis. Both parties knew that their prospects of success if they tried to seize power alone were dubious, to say the least. The logic of co-operation was therefore virtually inescapable; the only question was what form co-operation would eventually take. All over Europe, conservative elites, armies, and radical, fascist or populist mass movements faced the same dilemma. They solved it in a variety of ways, giving the edge to military force in some countries, like Spain, and to fascist movements in others, like Italy. In many countries in the 1920s and 1930s, democracies were being replaced by dictatorships. What happened in Germany in 1933 did not seem so exceptional in the light of what had already happened in countries such as Italy, Poland, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Portugal, Yugoslavia or indeed in a rather different way in the Soviet Union. Democracy was soon to be destroyed in other countries, too, such as Austria and Spain. In such countries, political violence, rioting and assassination had been common at various periods since the end of the First World War; in Austria, for instance, serious disturbances in Vienna had culminated in the burning down of the Palace of Justice in 1927; in Yugoslavia, Macedonian assassination squads were causing havoc in the political world; in Poland, a major war with the nascent Soviet Union had crippled the political system and the economy and opened the way to the military dictatorship of General Pilsudski. Everywhere, too, the authoritarian right shared most if not all of the antisemitic beliefs and conspiracy theories that animated the Nazis. The Hungarian government of Admiral Miklós Horthy yielded little to the German far right in its hatred of Jews, fuelled by the experience of the short-lived revolutionary regime led by the Jewish Communist Béla Kun in 1919. The Polish military regime of the 1930s was to impose severe restrictions on the country's large Jewish population. Seen in the European context of the time, neither the political violence of the 1920s and early 1930s, nor the collapse of parliamentary democracy, nor the destruction of civil liberties, would have appeared particularly unusual to a dispassionate observer. Nor was everything that subsequently happened in the history of the Third Reich made inevitable by Hitler's appointment as Chancellor. Chance and contingency were to play their part here, too, as they had before.^{[121](#)}

Nevertheless, the consequences of the events of 30 January 1933 in Germany were more serious by far than the consequences of the collapse of democracy elsewhere in Europe. The security provisions of the Treaty of Versailles had done nothing to alter the fact that Germany

was still Europe's most powerful, most advanced and most populous country. Nationalist dreams of territorial aggrandisement and conquest were present in other authoritarian regimes like Poland and Hungary as well. But these, if realized, were only likely to be of regional significance. What happened in Germany was likely to have a far wider impact than what happened in a small country like Austria, or an impoverished land like Poland. Its significance, given Germany's size and power, had the potential to be worldwide. That is why the events of the first six and a half months of 1933 were so momentous.

How and why did they occur? To begin with, no one would have thought it worth their while shoe-horning Hitler into the Reich Chancellery had he not been the leader of Germany's largest political party. The Nazis, of course, never won a majority of the vote in a free election: 37.4 per cent was all they could manage in their best performance, the Reichstag election of July 1932. Still, this was a high vote by any democratic standards, higher than many democratically elected governments in other countries have achieved since. The roots of the Nazis' success lay in the failure of the German political system to produce a viable, nationwide conservative party uniting both Catholics and Protestants on the right; in the historic weakness of German liberalism; in the bitter resentments of almost all Germans over the loss of the war and the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles; in the fear and disorientation provoked in many middle-class Germans by the social and cultural modernism of the Weimar years, and the hyperinflation of 1923. The lack of legitimacy of the Weimar Republic, which for most of its existence never enjoyed the support of a majority of the deputies in the Reichstag, added to these influences and encouraged nostalgia for the old Reich and the authoritarian leadership of a figure like Bismarck. The myth of the 'spirit of 1914' and the 'front generation', particularly strong among those too young to have fought in the war, fuelled a strong desire for national unity and an impatience with the multiplicity of parties and the endless compromises of political negotiations. The legacy of the war also included political violence on a massive and destructive scale and helped persuade many non-violent and respectable people to tolerate it to a degree that would be unthinkable in an effectively functioning parliamentary democracy.

A number of key factors, however, stand out from all the rest. The first is the effect of the Depression, which radicalized the electorate, destroyed or deeply damaged the more moderate parties and polarized the political system between the 'Marxist' parties and the 'bourgeois' groups, all of which moved rapidly towards the far right. The ever-growing threat of Communism struck fear into the hearts of bourgeois voters and helped shift political Catholicism towards authoritarian politics and away from democracy, just as it did in other parts of Europe. Business failures and financial disasters helped convince many

captains of industry and leaders of agriculture that the power of the trade unions had to be curbed or even destroyed. The political effects of the Depression hugely magnified those of the previous catastrophe of the hyperinflation, and made the Republic seem as if it could deliver nothing but economic disaster. Even without the Depression, Germany's first democracy seemed doomed; but the onset of one of history's worst economic slumps pushed it beyond the point of no return. Moreover, mass unemployment undermined Germany's once-strong labour movement, a solid guarantor of democracy as recently as 1920, when it had managed to defeat the right-wing Kapp putsch despite the toleration of the rebels by the army. Divided and demoralized, and robbed of its key weapon of the political mass strike, the German labour movement was caught between impotent support for the authoritarian regime of Heinrich Brüning on the one hand, and self-destructive hostility to 'bourgeois democracy' on the other.

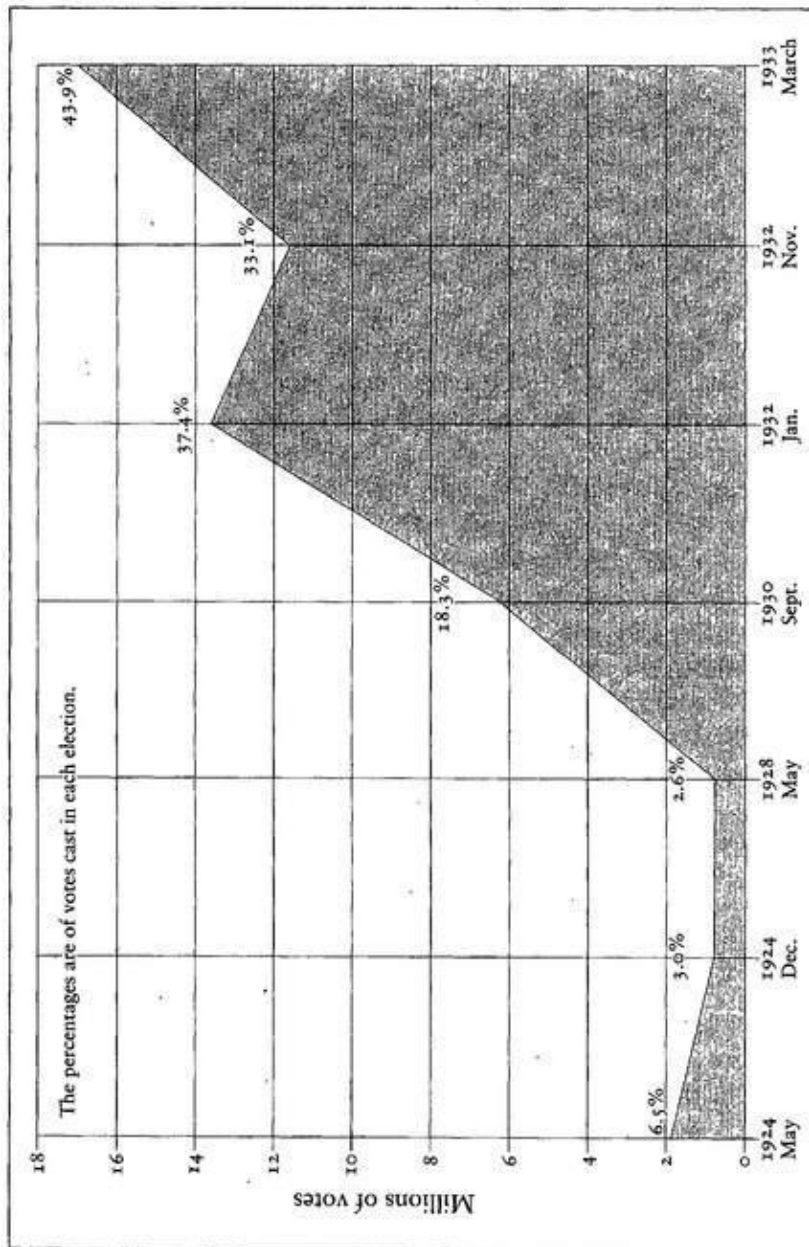


Figure 1. The Nazi Vote in Reichstag Elections, 1924-1933
The second major factor was the Nazi movement itself.

Its ideas evidently had a wide appeal to the electorate, or at least were not so outrageous as to put them off. Its dynamism promised a radical cure for the Republic's ills. Its leader Adolf Hitler was a charismatic figure who was able to drum up mass electoral support by the vehemence of his rhetorical denunciations of the unloved Republic, and to convert this into political office, finally, by making the right moves at the right time. Hitler's refusal to enter a coalition government in any other capacity but Reich Chancellor, a refusal that was terminally frustrating to some of his subordinates like Gregor Strasser, was proved right in the end. As deputy to the unpopular Papen or the equally unloved Schleicher, he would have lost heavily in reputation and surrendered a good deal of the charisma that came from being the Leader. The Nazi Party was a party of protest, with not much of a positive programme, and few practical solutions to Germany's problems. But its extremist ideology, adapted and sometimes veiled according to circumstance and the nature of the particular group of people to whom it was appealing, tapped into a sufficient number of pre-existing popular German beliefs and prejudices to make it seem to many well worth supporting at the polls. For such people, desperate times called for desperate measures; for many more, particularly in the middle classes, the vulgar and uneducated character of the Nazis seemed sufficient guarantee that Hitler's coalition partners, well educated and well bred, would be able to hold him in check and curb the street violence that seemed such an unfortunate, but no doubt temporary, accompaniment of the movement's rise to prominence.

The substantial overlap between the Nazis' ideology and that of the conservatives, even, to a considerable extent, that of German liberals, was a third major factor in bringing Hitler into the Reich Chancellery on 30 January 1933. The ideas that were current among almost all German political parties right of the Social Democrats in the early 1930s had a great deal in common with those of the Nazis. These ideas certainly bore enough resemblance to the Nazis' for the bulk of the liberal and conservative parties' supporters in the Protestant electorate to desert them, at least temporarily, for what looked like a more effective alternative. Nor were Catholic voters, and their representative, the Centre Party, any more committed to democracy by this time either. Moreover, even a substantial number of Catholics and workers, or at least those who for whatever reason were not as closely bound into their respective cultural-political milieu as the bulk of their fellows, turned to Nazism too. Only by striking a chord with pre-existing, often deep-seated social and political values could the Nazis rise so rapidly to become the largest party in Germany. At the same time, however, Nazi propaganda, for all its energy and sophistication, did not manage to win round people who were ideologically disinclined to vote for Hitler. Chronically underfunded for most of the time, and so unable to develop its full range of methods, excluded until

1933 from using the radio, and dependent on the voluntary work of often chaotic and disorganized local groups of activists, Goebbels's propaganda offensive from 1930 to 1932 was only one of a number of influences driving people to vote for the Nazis at the polls. Often, indeed, as in the rural Protestant north, they voted without having been reached by the Nazi propaganda machine at all. The Nazi vote was above all a protest vote; and, after 1928, Hitler, Goebbels and the Party leadership recognized this implicitly by removing most of their specific policies, in so far as they had any, from the limelight, and concentrating on a vague, emotional appeal that emphasized little more than the Party's youth and dynamism, its determination to destroy the Weimar Republic, the Communist Party and the Social Democrats, and its belief that only through the unity of all social classes could Germany be reborn. Antisemitism, so prominent in Nazi propaganda in the 1920s, took a back seat, and had little influence in winning the Nazis support in the elections of the early 1930s. More important by far was the image the Party projected on the street, where the marching columns of stormtroopers added to the general image of disciplined vigour and determination that Goebbels sought to project.¹²²

The Nazi propaganda effort, therefore, mainly won over people who were already inclined to identify with the values the Party claimed to represent, and who simply saw the Nazis as a more effective and more energetic vehicle than the bourgeois parties for putting them into effect. Many historians have argued that these values were essentially pre-industrial, or pre-modern. Yet this argument rests on a simplistic equation of democracy with modernity. The voters who flocked to the polls in support of Hitler, the stormtroopers who gave up their evenings to beat up Communists, Social Democrats, and Jews, the Party activists who spent their free time at rallies and demonstrations - none of these were sacrificing themselves to restore a lost past. On the contrary, they were inspired by a vague yet powerful vision of the future, a future in which class antagonisms and party-political squabbles would be overcome, aristocratic privilege of the kind represented by the hated figure of Papen removed, technology, communications media and every modern invention harnessed in the cause of the 'people', and a resurgent national will expressed through the sovereignty not of a traditional hereditary monarch or an entrenched social elite but of a charismatic leader who had come from nowhere, served as a lowly corporal in the First World War and constantly harped upon his populist credentials as a man of the people. The Nazis declared that they would scrape away foreign and alien encrustations on the German body politic, ridding the country of Communism, Marxism, 'Jewish' liberalism, cultural Bolshevism, feminism, sexual libertinism, cosmopolitanism, the economic and power-political burdens imposed by Britain and France in 1919, 'Western' democracy and much else. They would lay bare

the true Germany. This was not a specific historical Germany of any particular date or constitution, but a mythical Germany that would recover its timeless racial soul from the alienation it had suffered under the Weimar Republic. Such a vision did not involve just looking back, or forward, but both.

The conservatives who levered Hitler into power shared a good deal of this vision. They really did look back with nostalgia to the past, and yearn for the restoration of the Hohenzollern monarchy and the Bismarckian Reich. But these were to be restored in a form purged of what they saw as the unwise concessions that had been made to democracy. In their vision of the future, everyone was to know their place, and the working classes especially were to be kept where they belonged, out of the political decision-making process altogether. But this vision cannot really be seen as pre-industrial or pre-modern, either. It was shared in large measure, for one thing, by many of the big industrialists who did so much to undermine Weimar democracy, and by many modern, technocratic military officers whose ambition was to launch a modern war with the kind of advanced military equipment that the Treaty of Versailles forbade them to deploy. Like other people at other times and in other places, the conservatives, as much as Hitler, manipulated and rearranged the past to suit their own present purposes. They cannot be reduced to expressions of 'pre-industrial' social groups. Many of them, from capitalist Junker landlords looking for new markets, to small retailers and white-collar workers whose means of support had not even existed before industrialization, were as much modern as they were traditional.¹²³ It was these congruities in vision that persuaded men like Papen, Schleicher and Hindenburg that it would be worth legitimizing their rule by co-opting the mass movement of the Nazi Party into a coalition government whose aim was to erect an authoritarian state on the ruins of the Weimar Republic.

The death of democracy in Germany was part of a much broader European pattern in the interwar years; but it also had very specific roots in German history and drew on ideas that were part of a very specific German tradition. German nationalism, the Pan-German vision of the completion through conquest in war of Bismarck's unfinished work of bringing all Germans together in a single state, the conviction of the superiority of the Aryan race and the threat posed to it by the Jews, the belief in eugenic planning and racial hygiene, the military ideal of a society clad in uniform, regimented, obedient and ready for battle—all this and much more that came to fruition in 1933 drew on ideas that had been circulating in Germany since the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Some of these ideas, in turn, had their roots in other countries or were shared by significant thinkers within them - the racism of Gobineau, the anticlericalism of Schönerer, the paganist fantasies of Lanz von Liebenfels, the pseudo-scientific population

policies of Darwin's disciples in many countries, and much more. But they came together in Germany in a uniquely poisonous mixture, rendered all the more potent by Germany's pre-eminent position as the most advanced and most powerful state on the European Continent. In the years following the appointment of Hitler as Reich Chancellor, the rest of Europe, and the world, would learn just how poisonous that mixture could be.

II

For all his electoral successes, there has never been any doubt that Hitler came into office as the result of a backstairs political intrigue. 'The Germans' did not elect Hitler Reich Chancellor. Nor did they give their free and democratic approval to his creation of a one-party state. Yet some have argued that the Weimar Republic destroyed itself rather than being destroyed by its enemies: a case of political suicide rather than political murder.¹²⁴ Of the weakness of the Republic's polity in the supreme crisis of 1930-33 there can be little doubt. The Republic's fatal lack of legitimacy caused people to look all too readily to other political solutions for Germany's ills. But these ills were not just of the Republic's own making. Crucial to the whole process was the way in which democracy's enemies exploited the democratic constitution and democratic political culture for their own ends. Joseph Goebbels was quite explicit about this when he publicly ridiculed:

The stupidity of democracy. It will always remain one of democracy's best jokes that it provided its deadly enemies with the means by which it was destroyed. The persecuted leaders of the NSDAP became parliamentary deputies and so acquired the use of parliamentary immunity, allowances and free travel tickets. They were thus protected from police interference, could allow themselves to say more than the ordinary citizen, and apart from that they also had the costs of their activity paid by their enemy. One can make superb capital from democratic stupidity. The members of the NSDAP grasped that right away and took enormous pleasure in it.¹²⁵

There was no denying the Nazis' supreme contempt for democratic institutions. But it is in the nature of democratic institutions that they presuppose at least a minimal willingness to abide by the rules of democratic politics. Democracies that are under threat of destruction face the impossible dilemma of either yielding to that threat by insisting on preserving the democratic niceties, or violating their own principles by curtailing democratic rights. The Nazis knew this, and exploited the dilemma to the full in the second phase of the coming of the Third Reich, from February to July 1933.

Since the failure of his beer-hall putsch in November 1923, Hitler had always claimed that he was going to come to power by legal means. Indeed, he had said as much on oath in court. After 1923, he knew that a violent *coup d'état* along the lines of the October Revolution in Russia in 1917, or even the threatened 'march on Rome' which had

propelled Mussolini into Prime Ministerial office in Italy in 1922, would not work. At every point, therefore, Hitler and his associates sought a legalistic fig-leaf for their actions. All along, they avoided as far as possible giving their opponents the kind of opportunity that the Social Democrats had taken up in fighting Papen's Prussian coup of July 1932 through the courts. The Social Democrats had done this with a certain degree of legal success, though politically their court action had proved completely futile. Avoiding this precedent was why, for instance, Hitler placed so much importance on the Reichstag Fire Decree and the Enabling Act. It was why Goring enrolled the brownshirts and SS as auxiliary police in Prussia rather than simply letting them go on the rampage without so much as a pretence of legal cover for their actions. It was why the Nazi leadership insisted on implementing its initial wave of policies through laws approved by the Reichstag or sanctioned by Presidential decrees. And the strategy of the 'legal revolution' worked. Hitler's constant reassurances that he would act legally helped persuade his coalition partners and his opponents alike that the Nazis could be dealt with by legal means. Legal cover for the Nazis' actions allowed civil servants to draft the decrees and laws they demanded, even where, as with the Civil Service Act of 7 April 1933, they attacked the very principles of neutrality on which the civil service was based by requiring the dismissal of Jewish and politically unreliable bureaucrats from their positions. For civil servants, state employees and many others, the measures by which the Nazis seized power between the end of January and the end of July 1933 seemed irresistible because they appeared to carry the full force of the law.

Yet they did not. At every point in the process, the Nazis violated the law. In the first place, they contradicted the spirit in which the laws had been passed. Article 48 of the Weimar constitution, in particular, which gave the President the power to rule by decree in time of emergency, had never been intended to be the basis for any more than purely interim measures; the Nazis made it into the basis for a permanent state of emergency that was more fictive than real and lasted in a technical sense all the way up to 1945. Nor had Article 48 been intended to introduce measures as far-reaching as those passed on 28 February 1933. It was indeed unfortunate that President Ebert had made such liberal use and broad application of Article 48 earlier in the Republic's history, and doubly so that Reich Chancellors Brüning, Papen and Schleicher had relied on it so heavily in the crisis of the early 1930s. But even that paled into insignificance beside the drastic curtailment of civil liberties ordered on 28 February. Nor was the decree meant to be used by a Chancellor applying the President's rubber stamp. Hitler ensured in his negotiations with Hindenburg in January 1933 that it would be.¹²⁶ The Enabling Act was even more clearly a violation of the spirit of the constitution, as was the abolition of free elections that

followed. Yet the likelihood of this happening was scarcely a secret, since the leading Nazis clearly proclaimed during the election campaign that the election of 5 March would be the last for many years to come.

The Nazis did not just violate the spirit of the Weimar constitution, they also transgressed against it in a technical, legal sense too. The decree of 6 February 1933 that gave Goring control over Prussia clearly broke the findings of the State Court in the lawsuit brought against Papen by the deposed Social Democratic minority government in Prussia. The Enabling Act was legally invalid because Goring, as President of the Reichstag, did not count the elected Communist deputies. Though the two-thirds majority did not require them to be counted, refusing to recognize their existence was an illegal act. Moreover, the Act's ratification by the Federal Council, the upper chamber of the legislature, representing the federated states, was irregular since the state governments had been overthrown by force and were therefore not properly constituted or represented.¹²⁷ These were more than mere technicalities. But they were far outdone by the massive, sustained, and wholly illegal violence perpetrated by Nazi stormtroopers on the streets that already began in mid-February, reached new levels of intensity after the Reichstag fire, and swept across the country in March, April, May and June. The status of many of the perpetrators as auxiliary police in no way legalized the acts they committed. After all, putting someone into a policeman's uniform does not give him a licence to commit murder, to ransack offices, to confiscate funds, or to arrest people, beat them up, torture them and imprison them in hastily erected concentration camps without trial.¹²⁸

German judicial authorities were, in fact, fully aware of the illegal nature of Nazi violence even after the seizure of power. The Reich Ministry of Justice made strenuous efforts to have the mass arrests of the first half of 1933 subjected to a formal legal process; its intervention was simply disregarded. Throughout 1933 there were cases of state prosecutors bringing charges against brownshirts and SS men who had committed acts of violence and murder against their opponents. In August 1933 a special prosecution office was set up to co-ordinate these efforts. In December 1933 the Bavarian state prosecutor attempted to investigate the torturing to death of three prisoners in Dachau concentration camp, and when he was rebuffed, the Bavarian Minister of Justice announced his determination to pursue the matter with all possible vigour. The Reich Minister of the Interior complained in January 1934 that protective custody had been misused in many cases. It was only in April 1934 that a set of regulations was passed detailing who was entitled to arrest people and put them into 'protective custody' and what should happen to them when they got there. In the same year, however, the state prosecutor brought charges against twenty-three stormtroopers and political police officials at Hohnstein

concentration camp in Saxony, including the camp commandant, for the torture of inmates, which, Reich Minister of Justice Gürtner emphasized, 'reveals a brutality and cruelty in the perpetrators which are totally alien to German sentiment and feeling'.¹²⁹

Many of those who attempted to prosecute acts of torture and violence committed by Nazi stormtroopers were themselves fully paid-up Nazis. The Bavarian Justice Minister who tried to prosecute acts of torture in Dachau in 1933, for example, was none other than Hans Frank, later to acquire a brutal reputation as Governor-General of Poland during the Second World War. Nothing came of these legal initiatives, which were all frustrated by intervention from above, by Himmler or ultimately by Hitler himself.¹³⁰ An amnesty for crimes committed in the 'national uprising' was passed as early as 21 March 1933, quashing over 7,000 prosecutions.¹³¹ Everybody, including not least the Nazis, was aware throughout 1933 and 1934 that the brutal beatings, torture, maltreatment, destruction of property and violence of all kinds carried out against the Nazis' opponents, up to and including murder by the brown-shirted stormtroopers of the SA and the black-uniformed squads of the SS, were in flagrant violation of the law of the land. Yet this violence was a central, indispensable part of the Nazi seizure of power from February 1933 onwards, and the widespread, in the end almost universal fear that it engendered among Germans who were not members of the Party or its auxiliary organizations was a crucial factor in intimidating Hitler's opponents and bringing his sometimes rather unwilling allies into line.¹³²

There can be no doubt, finally, about the ultimate responsibility of Hitler and the Nazi leadership for these illegal acts. Hitler's contempt for the law and the Weimar constitution had been made clear on many occasions. 'We enter the legal agencies and in that way will make our Party the determining factor,' Hitler told the court at the 1930 army officers' trial in Leipzig. 'However, once we possess the constitutional power, we will mould the state into the shape we hold to be suitable.'¹³³ It was important, he told the cabinet in the immediate aftermath of the Reichstag fire, not to get too hung up on legal niceties in pursuing the supposed Communist perpetrators. Hitler's whole rhetoric, his whole posture in the first months of 1933 amounted to a continual encouragement of acts of violence against the Nazis' opponents. His appeals for discipline almost invariably went hand-in-hand with more generalized rhetorical attacks on their opponents which rank-and-file stormtroopers took as licence to continue the violence unabated. Massive, co-ordinated actions, like the occupation of the trade union offices on 2 May, persuaded ordinary brownshirts that they would not get into too much trouble if they acted on their own initiative on other occasions in the same spirit. And indeed they did not.¹³⁴

Most crucial of all was the fact that Hitler and the Nazis at

every level were very much aware of the fact that they were breaking the law. Their contempt for the law, and for formal processes of justice, was palpable, and made plain on innumerable occasions. Might was right. Law was just the expression of power. What counted, in the words of one Nazi journalist, was not the 'mendacious hypocrisy' of Germany's legal and penal systems, but 'the *law of power*, that incorporates itself in the blood ties and military solidarity of one's own race ... There is neither law nor justice in itself. What had succeeded in asserting itself as "law" in the struggle for power has to be protected, also for the sake of the victorious power.'^{[135](#)}



The illegal nature of the Nazi seizure of power in the first half of 1933 made it, in effect, into a revolutionary overthrow of the existing political system, and indeed the rhetoric of the 'National Socialist Revolution' was designed not least as an implicit justification of illegal acts. But what kind of revolution was it? The conservative administrator Hermann Rauschning, who began by working with the Nazis but by the late 1930s had become one of their fiercest and most persistent critics, described it as a 'nihilist revolution', a 'directionless revolution, a revolution merely for revolution's sake'. It destroyed all social order, all freedom, all decency; it was, as the title of the English edition of his book claimed, a 'revolution of destruction', nothing more.¹³⁶ But in his passionate diatribe, that ended with a clarion call for the restoration of true conservative values, Rauschning was doing little more than using 'revolution' as a rhetorical bludgeon with which to beat the Nazis for their overturning of the order he prized. Other revolutions, whatever Rauschning may have thought, delivered more than mere destruction. How then did the Nazi Revolution compare with them?

On the face of it, the Nazi Revolution was not really a revolution at all. The French Revolution of 1789 and the Russian Revolution of 1917 swept away the existing order by force and replaced it with something that the revolutionaries regarded as entirely new. Typically trying to have it both ways, by contrast the Nazis both used the rhetoric of revolution and claimed that they had come to power legally and in accordance with the existing political constitution. They took few concrete steps to abolish the central institutions of the Weimar Republic or to replace them with something else—the eventual abolition of the Presidential office in 1934 was a rarity in this respect. Instead, they preferred to let them atrophy, like the Reichstag, which barely met after 1933 and then only to hear speeches by Hitler, or the Reich cabinet, which itself also eventually ceased to meet.¹³⁷ On the other hand, what the conservative elites wanted - the staging of a genuine counter-revolution with the aid of the National Socialists, culminating in a restoration of the Wilhelmine Reich, or something very much like it, with or without the person of the Kaiser on the throne - failed to materialize as well. Whatever else happened in 1933, it was not a conservative restoration. The violence that was central to the seizure of power gave it a distinctly revolutionary flavour. The Nazi rhetoric of 'revolution' was virtually unchallenged after June 1933. Does it have to be taken at face value, then?¹³⁸

Some authors have argued that a direct historical line

can be drawn to Nazism from the French Revolution of 1789, the Jacobin 'Reign of Terror' in 1793-4, and the implicit idea of a popular dictatorship in Rousseau's theory of the 'General Will', decided initially by the people but brooking no opposition once resolved upon.¹³⁹ The French Revolution was indeed remarkable for its rehearsal of many of the major ideologies that bestrode the historical stage of Europe in the following two centuries, from communism and anarchism to liberalism and conservatism. But National Socialism was not among them. The Nazis, indeed, thought of themselves as undoing all the work of the French Revolution and rolling back the clock, in a political sense at least, much further: to the early Middle Ages. Their concept of the people was racial rather than civic. All the ideologies to which the French Revolution had given birth were to be destroyed. The Nazi Revolution was to be the world-historical negation of its French predecessor, not its historical fulfilment.¹⁴⁰

If there was a Nazi Revolution, then what did the Nazis think it would be? Once more, the parallel with the French or the Russian Revolution does not seem to work. The French revolutionaries of 1789 possessed a clear set of doctrines on the basis of which they would introduce the sovereignty of the people through representative institutions, while the Russian revolutionaries of October 1917 aimed to overthrow the bourgeoisie and the traditional elites and usher in the rule of the proletariat. By contrast, the Nazis had no explicit plan to reorder society, indeed no fully worked-out model of the society they said they wanted to revolutionize. Hitler himself seems to have thought of the Revolution as a changeover of personnel in positions of power and authority. In a speech to senior Nazi officials on 6 July 1933, he implied that the core of the Revolution lay in the elimination of political parties, democratic institutions and independent organizations. He seems to have regarded the conquest of power as the essence of the Nazi Revolution, and to have used the two terms virtually interchangeably:

The conquest of power requires insight. The conquest of power itself is easy, the conquest is only secure when the renewal of human beings is fitted to the new form ... The great task is now to regain control of the revolution. History shows more revolutions that have succeeded in the first run-up than those that have also been able to continue afterwards. Revolution must not become a permanent condition, as if the first revolution now had to be followed by a second, the second by a third. We have conquered so much that we will need a very long time to digest it ... Further development must take place as evolution, existing circumstances must be improved ...¹⁴¹

Fundamentally, therefore, while calling for a cultural and spiritual remaking of Germans in order to fit them to the

new form of the Reich, he thought that this had to be done in an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary manner. He went on:

The present structure of the Reich is something unnatural. It is neither conditioned by the needs of the economy nor by the necessities of life of our people ... We have taken over a given state of affairs. The question is whether we want to retain it ... The task lies in keeping and reshaping the given construction in so far as it is useable, so that what is good can be preserved for the future, and what cannot be used is removed.¹⁴²

The cultural transformation of the individual German that formed the most revolutionary aspect of the Nazis' intentions could, by analogy, also be achieved by preserving or resurrecting what the Nazis thought of as the good aspects of the German culture of the past, and removing what they conceived of as alien intrusions.

Even the stormtroopers, whose self-proclaimed drive for a 'second revolution' Hitler was explicitly criticizing here, had no real concept of any kind of systematic revolutionary change. A survey of grass-roots Nazi opinion in 1934 showed that a majority of the rank-and-file activists who had been in the Party under the Weimar Republic expected that the regime would bring about a national renaissance, described by one as a 'total reordering of public life' in which Hitler would 'purge Germany of people alien to our country and race who had sneaked into the highest positions and, together with other criminals, brought my German fatherland close to ruin'. A national renaissance in these men's understanding meant above all the reassertion of Germany's position in the world, the overturning of the Treaty of Versailles and its provisions, and the restoration, by war in all probability, of German hegemony in Europe.¹⁴³ These men were not revolutionaries in any wider sense, therefore; they had little or no concept of an inner transformation of Germany beyond purging it of Jews and 'Marxists'. The ceaseless activism of the brownshirts was to cause serious problems for the Third Reich in the months and years to come. In the second half of 1933 and the first half of 1934 it was frequently justified by claims that 'the revolution' had to continue. But the stormtroopers' idea of revolution was in the end little more than the continuation of the brawling and fighting to which they had become accustomed during the seizure of power.

For the upper echelons of the Nazi Party, and, above all, for the leadership, continuity was as important as change. The grand opening of the Reichstag in the garrison church at Potsdam after the March elections in 1933, with its ostentatious display of the symbols of the old social and political order, including the presiding throne reserved for the absent Kaiser, and the ceremonial laying of wreaths on the tombstones of the dead Prussian kings, powerfully

suggested that Nazism rejected the fundamentals of revolution and linked itself symbolically to key traditions from the German past. This may not have been the whole story, but it was more than a mere propaganda exercise or a cynical sop to Hitler's conservative allies. Moreover, the fact that so many people went over to Nazism in the weeks and months after Hitler became Chancellor, or at least tolerated it and offered no opposition, cannot just be put down to mere opportunism. This might be an explanation for an ordinary regime, but not for one with such pronounced and radical characteristics as that of the Nazis; and the speed and enthusiasm with which so many people came to identify with the new regime strongly suggests that a large majority of the educated elites in German society, whatever their political allegiance up to that point, were already predisposed to embrace many of the principles upon which Nazism rested.¹⁴⁴ The Nazis not only seized political power, they also seized ideological and cultural power in the opening months of the Third Reich. This was not only a consequence of the vague and protean quality of many of their own ideological statements, which offered all things to all people; it also derived from the way in which Nazi ideas appealed directly to many of the principles and beliefs which had spread through the German educated elite since the late nineteenth century. In the wake of the First World War, these principles and beliefs were held, not by an embattled revolutionary minority, but by major institutions of society and politics. It was those who rejected them, in part or in their totality, the Communists and the Social Democrats, who thought of themselves as revolutionaries, and were widely regarded as such by the majority of Germans.

All the great revolutions in history have rejected the past, even down to the point of beginning a new dating system with 'Year I', as the French Revolution did in 1789, or of consigning the previous centuries to the 'dustbin of history', to quote a famous phrase used by Trotsky in the Russian Revolution of 1917.¹⁴⁵ Such fundamentalism could also be found on the far right, for example in Schönerer's plan to introduce a German nationalist calendar instead of the Christian one. Yet even Schönerer's dating system began in the distant past. And for the Nazis and their supporters, the very term 'Third Reich' constituted a powerful symbolic link to the imagined greatness of the past, embodied in the First Reich of Charlemagne and the Second of Bismarck. Thus, as Hitler said on 13 July 1934, the Nazi Revolution restored the natural development of German history that had been interrupted by the alien impositions of Weimar:

For us, the revolution which shattered the Second Germany was nothing more than the tremendous act of birth which summoned the Third Reich into being. We wanted once again to create a state to which every German can cling in love; to establish a regime to which everyone can look up with respect; to find laws

which are commensurate with the morality of our people; to install an authority to which each and every man submits in joyful obedience.

For us, the revolution is not a permanent state of affairs. When a deathly check is violently imposed upon the natural development of a people, an act of violence may serve to release the artificially interrupted flow of evolution to allow it once again the freedom of natural development.¹⁴⁶

Once more, revolution appeared here as little more than the conquest of political power and the establishment of an authoritarian state. What was to be done with power, once gained, did not necessarily fall under the definition of a revolution. Most revolutions have ended, even if only temporarily, in the dictatorship of one man; but none apart from the Nazi revolution has actually been launched with this explicitly in mind. Even the Bolshevik Revolution was meant to put in place a collective dictatorship of the proletariat, led by its political vanguard, until Stalin came along.¹⁴⁷

Nazism offered a synthesis of the revolutionary and the restorative. A complete overthrow of the social system, such as was preached in Paris in 1789 or Petrograd in October 1917, was not what the Nazis had in mind. At the heart of the system that the Nazis created lay something else. For all their aggressively egalitarian rhetoric, the Nazis were relatively indifferent, in the end, to the inequalities of society. What mattered to them above all else was race, culture and ideology. In the coming years, they would create a whole new set of institutions through which they would seek to remould the German psyche and rebuild the German character. After the purges of artistic and cultural life were complete, it was time for those German writers, musicians and intellectuals who remained to lend their talents with enthusiasm to the creation of a new German culture. The Christianity of the established Churches, so far (for reasons of political expediency) relatively immune from the hostile attentions of the Nazis, would not be protected for much longer. Now the Nazis would set about constructing a racial utopia, in which a pure-bred nation of heroes would prepare as rapidly and as thoroughly as possible for the ultimate test of German racial superiority: a war in which they would crush and destroy their enemies, and establish a new European order that would eventually come to dominate the world. By the summer of 1933 the ground had been cleared for the construction of a dictatorship the like of which had never yet been seen. The Third Reich was born: in the next phase of its existence, it was to rush headlong into a dynamic and increasingly intolerant maturity.