



## The Rise of Hitler 1929-1934

This is a transcript of the [Rise of Hitler 1929-1934](https://www.mrallsophistory.com) podcast from [www.mrallsophistory.com](https://www.mrallsophistory.com)

In the previous podcast we explored the early years of the Nazi Party, during which time Hitler led a failed takeover of the government in Munich but used his trial for treason and subsequent imprisonment to advance and communicate the party's ideology to a national audience. However, his release from prison coincided with dramatic economic and diplomatic improvements in Weimar Germany that are sometimes referred to as the Stresemann years. Consequently, despite their improved organisation and impressive publicity, the Nazis were still a minority extremist party who had just 12 seats in the Reichstag. This podcast will explore how Hitler and Nazis came from this position to dominate Germany by the summer of 1934.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1929, Gustav Stresemann died. A few weeks later, on the 24<sup>th</sup> October in New York's Wall Street, the American stock exchange experienced the biggest crash in its history. The crash and its shockwave led to the worldwide Great Depression of the 1930s that plunged Germany into a particularly dire economic situation following the recall of loans that had been granted under the Dawes Plan by America. The Weimar government under the Chancellor Brüning responded by cutting government spending and benefits, which instead of solving the problem actually made the situation worse and seriously damaged the public's trust in the government. By 1932 six million Germans were out of work. This desperate situation marked a dramatic increase in support for the Nazis. For example, before the crisis in 1928 the Nazis had just 12 representatives in the Reichstag. Two years later, in 1930, they had 107 members. Two years after that, in July 1932, 230 members of the Reichstag were Nazis.

The big question that needs to be addressed is why so many people turned to the Nazis. Firstly, by 1929 Hitler had turned the Nazi party into a well-organised national political group and had secured the support of Alfred Hugenberg – a millionaire media tycoon. Hugenberg owned 53 German newspapers and had begun to support Hitler as the only viable nationalist politician with a working class following. All 53 of his newspapers therefore carried pro-Nazi messages that ensured that the party's message was spread around the country. In 1932 Hitler capitalised on this growing national appeal to stand in the Presidential election against Hindenburg. The German airline Lufthansa provided him with an aeroplane to allow him to quickly travel around Germany in order to speak at rallies in person, and this further developed his profile as he was able to speak personally in many towns and cities on the same day.

Hitler repeated a powerful message: he told the German people that the problems of the Depression were not their fault. Instead he identified targets to blame: Jews, Communists,



Weimar politicians and the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler claimed that he would be able to solve Germany's problems and campaigned based on broad slogans without any specific details. Consequently he was able to promise different things to different groups of people, and adapt his policies depending on their popularity. To business leaders, for example, Hitler promised to control the trade unions and deal with the Communists. His promise to remove the Communist threat also appealed to farmers, who were concerned by the collectivisation policies in Stalin's USSR. Meanwhile to workers, the traditional supporters of Communism, he promised that he would provide them with jobs and address the dramatic fall in incomes that had seen the average German who still had a job earn 40 per cent less than they had in 1929. But to all groups Hitler said that he would get rid of the Treaty of Versailles which had treated Germany so poorly in the aftermath of the First World War.

When he appeared in public, Hitler was always backed up by a large number of disciplined and uniformed followers. The image of authority that such an organisation projected made it appear like Hitler was a man who could take decisions and sort out the problems facing Germany. As the situation in the country became more and more desperate, people consequently became more ready to listen to the ideas of Hitler.

Hindenburg went on to win the 1932 Presidential election with 19 million votes to Hitler's 13 million, but the election campaign had secured the Nazis enormous publicity. Throughout the next few months Hitler argued that he should be given the post of Chancellor due to the Nazis to being the largest party in the Reichstag with 230 seats, although they didn't command a numerical majority. Hindenburg instead allowed the existing Chancellor Franz von Papen to continue in the role, although he was replaced by Kurt von Schleicher in December.

The problem was that neither von Papen nor von Schleicher had sufficient support in the Reichstag and so were unable to properly run the government. Desperate to resolve the situation, Hindenburg secretly met with von Papen – who had remained a close advisor of the President after he stepped down from the Chancellorship – and a number of politicians, military personnel and influential industrialists to discuss how to resolve the situation.

Although the Nazis had lost some seats in the most recent Reichstag elections, von Papen argued that Hitler and his 196 Nazi representatives in the Reichstag could be used to form a majority and get government moving again. They agreed to make Hitler the Chancellor based on the assumption that, by ensuring only a few Nazis were in the Cabinet and von Papen himself was Vice Chancellor, the Nazis could be controlled. Hitler was formally appointed German Chancellor on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1933.

Securing the Chancellorship was an important step for Hitler and the Nazis, but it did not mean that they would automatically dominate politics. However, Hitler was simply far too



charismatic and far too popular to be controlled. He sought to consolidate the Nazi position, and successfully transitioned from being an appointed Chancellor to the supreme leader of Germany in barely 18 months. He set about doing so almost immediately, by calling for another general election to take place at the beginning of March 1933.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> February, just a week before the election was due to take place, the Reichstag building itself mysteriously caught fire and burned down. A Dutch Communist, Marius van der Lubbe, was arrested inside the building and was blamed for starting the fire as part of a Communist uprising against the Weimar government. Hitler used the fire as an excuse to seek emergency powers from President Hindenburg, which he granted under Article 48 of the constitution. Consequently many members of the Communist Party, who just so happened to be the Nazis' main opponents, were arrested.

The general election went ahead as planned on the 5<sup>th</sup> March 1933, and the Nazis won 288 seats – their biggest number yet. This still wasn't a parliamentary majority, but 52 nationalists from other parties supported them. With the 81 elected Communists absent, Hitler was pretty much able to do as he liked. His first move was to get the Reichstag to pass the Enabling Act on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March, which gave Hitler the authority to introduce new laws without consulting the Reichstag. The Enabling Act effectively established Hitler as the democratically-approved dictator of Germany for four years. He swiftly began to use his new powers to crush all remaining opposition to the Nazi Party by banning all political parties except for the Nazis. He also banned trade unions and demanded that all workers instead join the Nazi-run German Labour Front known as the DAF.

For the next year Hitler gradually eroded the power of the democratic state so that by 1934 the Nazis dominated all its branches. The Civil Service, the courts, and the education system had all been purged of people who were a threat to Nazi dominance, following the ban of other political parties on the 14<sup>th</sup> July 1933. However, Hitler was still not entirely trusted by the army who viewed the SA with suspicion. Hitler himself had started to become concerned by the power wielded by Ernst Röhm, the leader of the SA, so on the weekend of the 30<sup>th</sup> June 1934 authorised what became known as the Night of the Long Knives.

Around 400 members of the SA, along with a number of other private individuals that Hitler didn't trust, were murdered by the SS. The main aim of this was to get rid of Ernst Röhm, the leader of the SA. He had been demanding that he should be made Commander In Chief of the German Army, but Hitler did not want to do this as he knew it would be unpopular with the Generals. Röhm was also the leader of the socialist wing of the Nazi Party. He wanted a social revolution to give working people more influence in Germany. Meanwhile Hitler wanted to set up a right-wing dictatorship, and was concerned that Röhm might use the SA under his command to remove Hitler and seize power. Although Röhm's claim that the SA had over 3 million supporters was an enormous exaggeration, there is little doubt that it had at least



500,000 members who would present a significant threat to Hitler unless they could be brought entirely under his control. The Night of the Long Knives achieved this aim and, although the SA continued to exist, it lost much of its authority.

The final step in Hitler assuming his dictatorship came with the death of President Hindenburg on the 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1934. The 84-year old President's death from lung cancer was seized upon by Hitler, who swiftly combined the posts of Chancellor and President into the new position of Führer or 'Supreme Leader'. He followed this with a plebiscite in which around 90% of those who voted approved of the change. All members of the armed forces now had to swear an oath of loyalty to the Nazi leader, which ensured that Hitler was the one and only person who could control the country. It had taken just 18 months for Hitler to move from being an appointed Chancellor to the dictator of Germany, but when addressing questions about the process it's important to remember the various actions that led to it being possible.

Firstly, Hitler capitalised on the long-term bitterness that many Germans felt towards the Weimar government in the aftermath of the First World War. The 'November Criminals' had signed the armistice and then the Treaty of Versailles, which was held responsible for the problems in the country.

Secondly, people were tired of the democratic system created by the Weimar constitution. Proportional representation in elections led to weak coalition governments that were forced to compromise rather than act with bold policies. This is shown through the failures of the government to deal successfully with the problems that came about during the Great Depression.

The Depression itself led people to look for someone or something to blame. Hitler offered targets for their anger, and the dramatic growth of the Nazi Party in the Reichstag following the Wall Street Crash – from 12 seats in 1928 to 230 in July 1932 – shows how the dire economic situation provided a catalyst for the rise of the Nazis.

Don't forget that Hitler had used the years up to 1929 to publicise the Party, which he had managed to do thanks to financial donations from business leaders and his connections in the press such as to the media tycoon Alfred Hugenberg. His use of propaganda, overseen and directed by Goebbels, was directed at blaming other people for Germany's problems – most significantly the Jews and the Communists – and Hitler's engaging speaking skills led people to listen to what he had to say.

Having secured the largest number of seats in the Reichstag, Hindenburg appointed Hitler as Chancellor on the 30<sup>th</sup> January 1933. The Nazi leader followed this with a series of measures to secure and consolidate his position. The Reichstag Fire led to Hindenburg granting



emergency powers to Hitler, which he used to round up his political opponents such as the Communists. Although the subsequent general election on 5 March still didn't return a Nazi majority, the arrest of Communists and a convenient alliance with other nationalist parties allowed Hitler to gain approval for the Enabling Act on 23 March 1933 which gave him virtual dictatorial powers. The Nazi take-overs over local government, the banning of trade unions on 2 May 1933, and the ban of other political parties on 14 July further secured Nazi dominance.

To ensure there were no internal Nazi Party threats to his position, Hitler turned on the powerful SA and its leader, Ernst Röhm, during the Night of the Long Knives on 30 June 1934. Finally, following the death of Hindenburg on 19 August, Hitler proclaimed himself Führer. Each of these factors played a role in the Nazi take-over of power, so you need to ensure you can explain both what happened and how it helped the Nazis to dominate Germany by the summer of 1934.