

## CASE STUDY:

# The Rise of Naziism and the Destruction of Liberal Democracy

Democracies across the western world are in decline. According to a study in the journal *Democratization*, democracy is on the decline in 24 countries, home to 2.6 billion people. From India to the United States to Poland and beyond, the rule of law, freedom of the press, and freedom of expression are in decline. And recent events suggest that liberal democracy in Canada is not immune to the creeping power of authoritarian, anti-democratic forces.

Liberal democracy's recent decline is not unprecedented. Democracies have fallen in the past: perhaps the most dramatic breakdown of a liberal democracy in modern history was the breakdown of the German Weimar Republic, in the period between World War I and World War II. The Weimar Republic was replaced by the Nazi regime.

## ***How the Nazis Came to Power***

There are many theories about how the Nazis came to rule Germany. Some historians point to the Treaty of Versailles, Germany's peace agreement with the Allies following World War I. The treaty's compromises battered national morale, and are said to have weakened the German economy. Others point to Black Friday, the 1929 stock market crash that triggered the Great Depression. Germany was hit particularly hard due to its economic ties with the United States. And others point to street violence between battling political factions. Some German political parties created paramilitaries who engaged in widespread street fighting.

Like almost all things in life, there is no single explanation for how the Nazis came to power. All of these factors—and many more—had a role in facilitating the rise of Naziism in Germany.

One factor in Naziism's rise was a lack of political consensus in Germany. Following World War I, Germans never came to a consensus on the big ideas about how their democracy should operate. The country, informally known as the Weimar Republic, had its post-war constitution largely imposed upon it by the Allies.

The Weimar constitution attempted to shape Germany as a liberal democracy, similar to France or the United States. Germany's liberal post-war constitution imposed many changes on Germany, such as allowing for freedom of expression.

Because the constitution was imposed on Germany, many people viewed the expansion of liberal rights as not an organic development, but rather the imposition of foreign values. This led many people to resent the liberal changes that they were seeing in German society.

Further frustrating German citizens was that economic power largely remained in the hands of a few monopolistic capitalists.



Even though the Weimar Republic guaranteed individual rights, people felt the elite had too much control of society.

Germany's morale, unity, and economic problems spawned radical criticism. Like most liberal democracies—such as Canada or the United States today—Germany's post-war constitution allowed radical criticism to take place in the public sphere. Many small political parties and fringe groups emerged, all competing for power.

In theory, radical criticism is not necessarily a bad thing: it often helps to actualise needed social change. However, in Germany, the leading criticism on the far right came from a particularly dangerous group, the Nazis.

## Who Were the Nazis?

The Nazis were a political party formally called the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*. In English, this means the National Socialist German Workers' Party. It formed in 1920. Even though they called themselves socialist, there was very little that was socialist about the party. Nazi leader Adolph Hitler appropriated the word socialist as a matter of fashion to take advantage of the ideology's popularity at the time.

The term Nazi was used by opponents of the party, due to the word's informal link to foolishness and clumsiness. The Nazis promised to restore Germany to its former greatness. Underpinning this promise was a racist and anti-democratic worldview. According to historian Jeremy Noakes, Nazis believed that Germany's problems were:

fostered and exploited by the Jews through the doctrines of Liberalism with its emphasis on the priority of the individual over the community, [and the result of] democracy with its subordination of the 'creative' and 'heroic' individual to the mass, and of Marxism with its advocacy of class war.

Put more simply, Nazis contended that the well-being of regular German citizens was being

harmed by forces out of their immediate control, and liberal democracy was enabling it.

This critique first appeared destined for failure. The Nazis captured only 3% of the vote in Germany's 1928 federal election. However, as German instability grew—especially economically with the onset of the Great Depression—so too did the Nazi vote. A series of elections between September 1930 and March 1933 saw Nazi support increase dramatically.

## Nazis in Power

In July 1932, the Nazis became the largest party in the Reichstag, Germany's proportionally-representative parliament. They took 37% of the popular vote. By January 1933, Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany, and began to use the power of office to undermine the Weimar Republic's liberal institutions.

One of Hitler's early moves as Chancellor was to give the Nazi Brownshirts (the paramilitary arm of the Nazi party) the same powers as the police. Brownshirts engaged in anti-liberal activities: breaking up opposition party meetings, physically beating opposition party members, and seizing the assets of their enemies.

Hitler also started to replace key government bureaucrats with Nazi party members. This ensured that the government bureaucracy's first loyalty was to him. Meanwhile, many businesspeople rallied to the Nazi cause, partially out of a fear of the rising power of the Communist party.

# Hitler Takes Absolute Control

A fire in the German Reichstag, in February 1933, set the stage for Hitler to take absolute control of Germany. The fire, on the eve of an election, appeared to be a case of arson. Historians are still unsure whether the fire was set by Communists, or whether it was set by the Nazis to manufacture a crisis. Regardless of who started the fire, it created a sense of a national emergency.

Hitler used the Reichstag fire as an excuse to issue the *Decree for the Protection of the People and the State*. The decree stripped Germans of most of their liberal constitutional rights, such as freedom of the press, freedom of association, freedom of expression, and rights to privacy. The Decree remained in force throughout Hitler's reign. The first people to be targeted by this Decree were the Communists, who were blamed for the fire. Over 1,000 were immediately arrested, right before the March 5<sup>th</sup> election.

In the March election, Nazis were denied an outright majority. They took 43% of the vote and 45% of the seats in the Reichstag. Lacking an outright majority to pass their laws, the Nazis partnered with smaller right-wing parties and physically forced Socialist and Communist representatives out of the Reichstag. This gave them majority control of the legislature.

With majority control of the legislature, Hitler was able to pass the anti-democratic *Enabling Act*. This law ended the requirement that laws be debated and voted on in the Reichstag. Instead, Hitler and his cabinet could simply proclaim laws.

Once the *Enabling Act* effectively disempowered the Reichstag, it only met 19 times. In that time, only seven laws were adopted by it. Hitler's 986 other laws were almost all passed through cabinet proclamations. Amongst these proclamations was the law that banned all political parties except the Nazis. There were a few other laws that were affirmed by national referendums. For

example, Germany's withdrawal from the League of Nations was approved by a national vote.

With the *Fire Decree* and the *Enabling Act* in place, civil society and parliament lost their constitutionally-protected powers. There was no more freedom of speech or freedom of assembly in Germany, and legislators no longer voted on proposed laws. The only checks left on Hitler were the courts, and the office of the President.

To bring the courts to his favour, Hitler set up the People's Court. This court had jurisdiction over anything deemed a political offence. The People's Court was established after Germany's Supreme Court acquitted four of the five accused Reichstag arsonists, because there was a lack of evidence. The decision enraged Hitler, so he created a court that would be under Nazi control.

Hitler's last hurdle in his path to absolute power was dismantling the Office of the President of Germany. The President of Germany was an elected position, independent of the cabinet and legislature. The President of Germany had several constitutional powers:

- they could appoint and dismiss the Chancellor and cabinet,
- they were the head of the armed forces, and
- they could rule by special decrees.

When President Hindenburg died in 1934, Hitler declared himself Germany's President, Chancellor, and Head of the Military. He held a national plebiscite looking for public approval of his move. 88% approved, though voter intimidation took place across the country. Nevertheless, some historians believe that even when accounting for voter intimidation, Hitler still had the support of the majority of the country.

Hitler, over the course of a few short years, was able to destroy liberal democracy in Germany. There would be no more individual or minority rights in Germany, and no institutions could act as a check on Hitler's power.

# Germany under Nazi Control

Under Nazi control, liberal democracy was replaced by a Nazi view of democracy:

Every actual democracy rests on the principle that not only are equals equal but unequals will not be treated equally. Democracy requires therefore first homogeneity and second—if the need arises—elimination or eradication of heterogeneity.

In other words, far-right thinkers in Germany believed democracy would only work if everyone was the same. Because everybody was not the same, diversity had to be destroyed.

In the place of a diverse society, the Nazis set to work to create a singular, racially-unified German society called the *Volksgemeinschaft*. To build public support for Hitler's new society, Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels crafted a new narrative about Germany's greatness, and what it meant to be German. People who were not part of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, such as Jews, Communists, and homosexuals, were cast as "others," not to be tolerated. As well, fears were stoked about threats to Germany's security. These threats helped to psychologically prepare the German population for war.

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## DISCUSS

1. To gain power, Nazis were particularly effective in motivating non-politically conscious citizens to vote for them. What does the election of the Nazis tell us about the importance of being well-informed before casting a ballot?
2. After the March 1933 election, the Nazi party was flooded with applications for membership. What does this tell us about the nature of ambition and power?
3. Hitler did not destroy Germany's liberal democracy overnight. The removal of rights and freedoms and the dismantling of liberal democratic institutions and constitution happened in steps.
  - a) What steps did Hitler take to dismantle liberal democracy?
  - b) What does Hitler's rise tell us about the importance of being vigilant observers of our democracy?