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## Hitler Comes to Power

For all those interested in German history, and perhaps not for them alone, the seminal question of the twentieth century is: How could Hitler come to power? The question has been raised many times and has received almost as many answers. Yet Hitler's accession to power on January 30, 1933, one of the crucial events of our century, seems to be obscured rather than explained by the very mass of information and by the innumerable interpretations concerned with it. We know much, but we understand little about how Germany came to give itself over to a dictatorship that turned out to be of unprecedented criminality in history. It might be refreshing, therefore, just to apply the known facts to simple questions and answers. Let us avoid sweeping statements and instead ask modest but precise questions without hesitating to repeat the obvious. We shall begin with unquestionable facts and try to explain them as precisely as possible in the light of our present knowledge.

The first fact is that Hitler came to power as chancellor because President Hindenburg appointed him. That is indis-

putable. It was in the first instance not groups such as industry, or systems like capitalism, or authoritarian ideas, that brought the leader of the Nazi party to power; it was simply the president. Again, Hitler did not come to power through a coup d'état or a revolution, but rather by appointment within the constitutional framework of the Weimar Republic.

The first question, therefore, is a double one: Why did Hindenburg appoint Hitler, and how was he able to do so? For human beings do not act only from personal motives. They act also, and above all, according to certain conditions. They cannot do everything they want to do. Of what they want to do, they do only what they can. We shall therefore analyze primarily, not Hindenburg's motives, but the conditions under which he acted.

(We may anticipate a simple answer: Hindenburg appointed Hitler because Hitler was the leader of the strongest party in Germany.) This statement remains to be elaborated but it will be found to be as indisputable as the first one. The next question will then have to be why and how the Nazi party had become the strongest party.

One objection can be raised against the assumptions implied in the second question just posed. The Nazi party had already become the strongest party six months earlier, during the elections of July 31, 1932. Consequently we must ask why Hitler was not appointed chancellor until half a year later. Again we can anticipate a simple answer: The Nazis did not have a majority in the Reichstag either in the summer of 1932 or at the time of Hitler's appointment. Hitler was not brought to power by a parliamentary majority; nearly two thirds of the German electorate had not voted for him. This fact complicates our understanding of the events. Had the Nazi party held a majority in the Reichstag, the appointment of Hitler would be easier to explain. We would have to ask only how that majority had come about. Nevertheless, although the Nazis did not have a majority, their limited elec-

toral successes are one condition that led to Hitler's appointment as chancellor. This leads us to our third question: Why and how did this party come into being? This question must be clearly separated from that regarding the party's electoral successes. For the successes began only after 1929, whereas the party was founded in 1919.

Thus we have arrived at the triple question. It concerns first of all Hindenburg, who appointed Hitler; second, the voters who made Hitler a political factor; and third, the party that attracted the voters. All three questions have to be raised together. Whoever asks only about Hindenburg neglects the electorate, without which he would not have appointed Hitler. Again, whoever asks only about the electorate overlooks the fact that it did not give the Nazi party a majority. And whoever asks only about the party needs reminding that it would not have come to power without the electorate and without Hindenburg. Let us begin, therefore, at the logical beginnings, with the question why Hindenburg appointed Hitler.

#### THE ROLE OF HINDENBURG

Although in appointing Hitler chancellor Hindenburg acted within the framework of the constitution, he was not required to appoint him at any time. Article 53 of the Weimar constitution empowered the president to appoint the chancellor of his choice.<sup>1</sup> This freedom was restricted only by Article 54, which stipulated that the chancellor and the ministers must command the confidence of the Reichstag.

Thus, Hitler or any would-be chancellor could not simply concern himself with his own appointment; he needed the backing of a majority in the Reichstag. This meant 293 votes of the then 584 members. The Nazis numbered only 196. They were 97 seats short of a majority, thus Hitler formed a coalition cabinet. His coalition partner, the Conservative party, however, had only 52 members in parliament, leav-

ing the Hitler government short 45 seats for an absolute majority. Thus Hitler's government, like its three predecessors, was a so-called presidential cabinet.

A presidential cabinet was not provided for in the constitution, but had a legal basis in it through a combination of Articles 48 and 53. According to Article 48 the president could take any steps necessary to restore law and order should they be considerably disturbed or endangered. The president alone decided when that state of emergency had been reached and what measures could be taken. The constitution called for a law to provide detailed regulations for carrying out Article 48, but such a law was never passed. The president's power under Article 48 was restricted, however, by the stipulation that he inform the Reichstag immediately of any emergency measures taken; the Reichstag could in turn annul those measures by a simple majority vote. Thus the president's immense emergency powers could be nullified if and when the majority of the members of parliament so wished.

It was on this legal basis that Germany had been governed since March 30, 1930. Pursuant to Article 53 of the Weimar constitution the president had appointed three successive chancellors: Heinrich Brüning, Franz von Papen, and Kurt von Schleicher. None of them commanded the confidence of the Reichstag. But since the Reichstag's confidence did not need to be overtly expressed, only overtly denied, the chancellors governed so long as a vote of no confidence was not put. They governed with the backing, or confidence, of the president alone.

Laws were a different matter. The laws had to be passed by the Reichstag. If laws were needed and their passage was not likely, the president might issue decrees under Article 48 without having to justify his initiative by proving that public order was considerably disturbed or endangered. These decrees, which were called emergency decrees, did not have to be passed by the Reichstag. But, again, the Reichstag could annul

them by a simple majority vote. If this happened, the government could no longer govern. Brüning's cabinet faced this challenge on July 18, 1930.

In this circumstance the president had still another weapon. According to Article 25 he could dissolve the Reichstag. Within sixty days of a dissolution a general election had to be held. Hindenburg dissolved the Reichstag on July 18, 1930, and made full use of the period of sixty days that followed. During this time his chancellor could continue to govern without fear of interference from the Reichstag. When the Reichstag reassembled after the election of September 14, however, the government found that its support in the parliament had decreased. Yet it was precisely because of the erosion of his support through the Nazi victory of September 14, 1930, that Brüning was able to remain in office for another eighteen months. In order to prevent Brüning's fall and Hitler's possible accession to the chancellorship, the majority of the Reichstag no longer used its right to put a vote of no confidence or to annul Brüning's numerous emergency decrees. The Reichstag was prepared to tolerate the chancellor. Brüning was finally dismissed by Hindenburg on May 30, 1932, and was succeeded by Papen. For the time being we shall not deal with the reasons for Brüning's dismissal or with the political and economic issues behind these developmental, but shall continue merely to explain their constitutional implications.

Unlike Brüning's cabinet, Papen's ultraconservative cabinet could not expect to be tolerated by the Reichstag, and the Reichstag was again dissolved immediately after Papen was appointed. This gave him the chance of governing freely for fifty-seven days, until the election of July 31. He won another month's reprieve because the Reichstag was not bound to assemble until thirty days after the election, according to Article 23. When the Reichstag finally convened on August 30, it passed a vote of no confidence against Papen by the enormous majority of 512 voted against 42 with 5 abstentions.

This should have meant that the chancellor was deposed, but either immediately before or after this vote (a question that remained unresolved in the tumultuous session) the Reichstag was dissolved once more and Papen again gained fifty-five days, until the election of November 6. But this election also failed to produce a working majority; Papen had thus failed in his attempts to form a government with majority support. On December 6, thirty days after the election, the new Reichstag would reassemble and Papen could expect another vote of no confidence, after which not even Hindenburg could save him.

Hindenburg now had three options. He could immediately dissolve the Reichstag again. Papen would then have gained another three months in office—sixty days until the election and another thirty until the reassembly of the Reichstag. But this method was outworn and on the brink of illegality, and it did not promise a way out of the crisis.

Second, Hindenburg could accept Papen's suggestion to dissolve the Reichstag but delay the election beyond the prescribed day. This would have been a blatant breach of the constitution, and Hindenburg was not prepared to do this. He would have to break his oath to the constitution, which he took seriously, and he would have to answer to the supreme court, a circumstance that would have rendered the country altogether ungovernable. He could also have prompted a civil war, which the army declared itself incapable of winning for several reasons, including the possibility that other countries such as Poland might exploit the internal strife in Germany.

There remained only a third option: to appoint a new chancellor. Hence Papen was dismissed and on December 2, 1932, four days before the new Reichstag was to assemble, Schleicher was appointed. The Reichstag restrained itself from passing an immediate vote of no confidence against the new chancellor. It adjourned until after Christmas and Schleicher gained a brief respite to govern.)

Sooner or later, as Schleicher knew, the responsible committee would summon the Reichstag again. After a second postponement the committee set the date of Tuesday, January 31, 1933. Schleicher had failed to rally a majority, and Hindenburg was again confronted with the same three options he had faced in November. Again he rejected a breach of the constitution, which Schleicher now suggested to him. In the end he even denied Schleicher the constitutional recourse of dissolving the Reichstag, whereupon the chancellor resigned on Saturday, January 28.

On Monday, January 30, Hindenburg appointed Hitler. We are now able to understand better the advantages that this move held for the president. As we have seen, Hitler also lacked a majority in parliament, but together with his Conservative partners he was short only forty-five votes. This was a much broader parliamentary basis for governing than either Papen or Schleicher had had. If the Reichstag were dissolved now (as it was soon after), it could be hoped that the new coalition government would win the necessary forty-five seats and so attain a majority in parliament. Thus it would be possible to restore the original sense of the constitution.

This sounds altogether cynical and holds true in a purely formalistic sense only, since Hitler was a declared enemy of the constitution and had never hidden his intention of abolishing it. But Hitler promised to abolish the constitution without breaching it. He proposed to use constitutional means to gain a parliamentary majority in order to destroy the constitution by due process. This was in accordance with Hindenburg's wishes. Hindenburg was not a democrat but basically a royalist. He did not want to preserve the constitution at all costs. He only wanted to avoid breaching it and, formally speaking, he was successful. We may say, therefore, that Hindenburg appointed Hitler because Hitler offered an opportunity to render the country governable again without breaching the constitution.

Needless to say, this explanation is not yet sufficient. It covers only a superficial series of events, and we need to know more, for example, about Hindenburg's motives. We can say at once that he was not pleased by his appointment of Hitler. Hitler was not his favorite candidate. Personally and politically Brüning and Papen had been to his liking; Hitler was not. Hindenburg despised this Bohemian corporal, as he called him, and recognized the potential dangers of his accession with remarkable insight. Moreover they had been opposing candidates in a bitter presidential election in the spring of 1932.

On November 24, 1932, Hindenburg had informed Hitler that he could not appoint him chancellor because he feared that "a presidential cabinet led by Hitler would necessarily develop into a party dictatorship with all its consequences for an extreme aggravation of the conflicts within the German people." As late as January 26, 1933, Hindenburg told his entourage: "Gentlemen, I hope you will not hold me capable of appointing this Austrian corporal to be Reich chancellor." And it was with an expression of resignation that on January 28 he asked his advisers who had opened the way to a Hitler government, "Does this mean that I have the unpleasant task of appointing this Hitler chancellor?"<sup>2</sup>

To understand how Hindenburg overcame his distaste for and doubts about Hitler, we must examine once more the conditions under which he acted at the end of 1932 and beginning of 1933. The president's freedom to act was considerable but not unlimited. The Reichstag could in principle at any time have proposed a candidate who commanded a majority and Hindenburg would in all likelihood have appointed him chancellor. He could appoint chancellors of his own choice only because the Reichstag itself no longer presented any majority candidate. On the other hand, Hindenburg's minority chancellors could govern only as long as they

were at least tolerated by the Reichstag. This had not been the case since the dismissal of Brüning.

By dismissing Brüning needlessly in May 1932, Hindenburg created the predicament that ultimately led him to appoint Hitler. Hindenburg dismissed Brüning because the president wanted to move away from the parliamentary regime and gradually introduce a more conservative and authoritarian system that might eventually lead to the restoration of the monarchy. We can go further and say that the same intentions guided him when he appointed Brüning. In itself this does not require much of an explanation. The old field marshal was, we repeat, not a democrat but a royalist. What requires an explanation is not his lifelong royalist convictions but the conditions under which he could implement them. This, in turn, raises questions about the basic structural problems of the Weimar Republic.

No political party in the Weimar Republic had ever had an absolute majority; hence all the governments were coalitions and most of them had only minority support in the Reichstag. The first duly constituted German government after the fall of the empire in November 1918 and the national elections of 1919 consisted of Social Democrats, left Liberals, and Catholic Centrists. This so-called Weimar coalition, which then drew up the Weimar constitution, lost its majority in the election of 1920 and never regained it. These three parties were basically the only ones firmly tied to the Weimar constitution, although there are some reservations in the case of the Center party. We can say, therefore, that the parliamentary, democratic, and republican form of government had had no support from the majority of the population since 1920.

Another group of parties, led by the Conservatives and the right Liberals, adhered to the idea of a constitutional monarchy, like the one that had ruled Germany until November 1918. But these parties also failed to win a majority. They

could govern only in partnership with at least one party from the Weimar coalition.

The situation in the Weimar Republic in the 1920s had reached a stalemate. Neither of the two leading groups in German society was strong enough to govern the state alone, but each was strong enough to prevent the other from doing so. Since their differences stemmed from their principles, compromises were difficult. They recognized no common ground on which they could explain and settle normal conflicting interests. The stalemate, with its roots deep in German history, came to a head after the First World War. The Conservatives scored a victory in 1925 when Hindenburg was elected president. The Republicans, in turn, scored a victory in 1928 when they almost regained the majority in the Reichstag and a Social Democrat became chancellor once again.

None of these victories was decisive or broke the stalemate. But the Conservatives were alarmed at the success of the Left in 1928 and thereupon tried, with the help of the president, to regain the position they had held until 1918. Their chance came in March 1930 when the Social Democratic chancellor Hermann Müller and, with him, the last majority government of the Weimar Republic resigned.<sup>3</sup> Hindenburg seized this opportunity to become independent of parliamentary majorities and to appoint Brüning. If we say that the downhill course that led to Hitler's appointment in January 1933 began with Brüning's appointment in March 1930, then we can also say that Hindenburg's undemocratic attitude contributed strongly to this development. Had Hindenburg been a convinced supporter of the parliamentary system of government he would have negotiated another majority government. Since he was not a supporter but an opponent of the parliamentary system, and since he particularly disliked the Social Democrats, he snatched the opportunity to get rid of them when it arose in

March 1930.  
*But he had*

It is equally true that Hindenburg was able to appoint Brüning and the other, later minority, chancellors only because by March 1930 the Reichstag itself was no longer able to form a majority government. Had a majority chancellor been proposed, Hindenburg would most likely have appointed him and let him govern. He never envisaged a coup d'état or wished Hitler to come to power. He only sought to profit from the given situation, from what we have described as a stalemate. Today we know that the Müller cabinet, had it not broken up, could have survived the worst part of the international economic crisis with a sound parliamentary majority, since its legislative term did not expire until May 1932. Instead, the Reichstag was prematurely dissolved and in the elections of September 1930 Hitler won his first major breakthrough.

This is worth repeating. The Müller cabinet was not overthrown in March 1930; it resigned. It is well known that the coalition partners could not agree on a question of unemployment benefits. But to see this as the reason for the resignation of the cabinet would be to confuse the long-term cause with the immediate trigger. The crucial factor was the structural stalemate of the Weimar Republic. Under the conditions of a stalemate Hindenburg was able to appoint his conservative minority chancellors. When they were no longer tolerated by the Reichstag, the state became ungovernable. In the course of the periodic elections held in hopes of providing these minority chancellors with a majority, the Nazi party became instead the strongest party. Still Hindenburg refused to appoint Hitler after these elections; he declined explicitly in August 1931 and again in November 1932.

We have to ask, therefore, why he changed his mind in January 1933. The answer is clear. The Conservative party in the meantime had been persuaded to form a coalition with the Nazi party and Hitler had reduced his demands. Apart

from himself, only two Nazis were to become members of the cabinet; in addition, two ministers belonged to the Conservative party, and the rest were independents. Hindenburg's adviser, Papen, became vice chancellor. Finally, before appointing Hitler, Hindenburg had been allowed to appoint a defense minister of his own choice. In other words, the risks involved in Hitler's appointment had been reduced for Hindenburg. Hitler had been "fenced in," as the famous formula ran, and with that, Hindenburg's doubts had been appeased.

The distribution of authority in the new coalition government was the result of unusual negotiations. Normally the president directed such negotiations himself (he did so for the last time in November 1932), since he was the one who finally had to appoint the chancellor. Hitler was the first and only chancellor whom Hindenburg appointed without having negotiated with him beforehand. Instead, the negotiations had been conducted by Papen, who managed to create the coalition that was formed on January 30. It was above all Papen who had allayed Hindenburg's doubts.

Papen's role is well known. He was not a member of parliament, not even a member of a political party, let alone the leader of one (he had once played a minor role in the Center party). Nor was he the delegated leader of any organized group. He was a private person, accountable to no one, free of all responsibilities, indeed irresponsible in every sense. His power rested solely on Hindenburg's trust, which he had gained when he was chancellor. The fact that as a former chancellor he was pressing for his own return to power is obvious and can be accepted without further elaboration. The additional consideration that Papen was shortsighted and frivolous is perhaps relevant but beyond the scope of our historical inquiry. The one point that does have to be recognized is that he was in a position to direct the vital negotiations in a national crisis. The responsibility for forming a

cabinet had passed first from the parties to the president and then from the president to a private person.

As far as Papen's negotiations are concerned, we neither can nor need to describe their complicated course here. All we need to know is that the industrialist Wilhelm Keppler, who was also Hitler's economic adviser, had persuaded a banker, Kurt von Schröder, to arrange a meeting between Hitler and Papen, which took place at Schröder's house in Cologne on January 4, 1933. As a result of this and many subsequent consultations, Papen and others persuaded Hindenburg to appoint Hitler.

This series of meetings raises the question of the role of industry in Hitler's accession.<sup>4</sup> We will examine this highly controversial issue with particular care by extracting the real questions from the morass of sweeping statements that usually accompany them. It is obvious that the general statement that Hitler was brought to power by industry or industrialists is of no use. Neither is it helpful to demonstrate that any number of industrialists recommended Hitler's coming to power or promoted it in other ways. Our task is rather to see whether this support did in fact contribute to Hitler's coming to power. Various answers to this question are possible. The first could be that industrialists induced Papen to negotiate with Hitler. This is improbable. Immediately after his dismissal Papen began trying to form a new government; his desire to return to power is a sufficient explanation for this. Nevertheless, Papen's access to Hitler remains a problem. The two men were not on good terms, which may explain why Papen needed mediators, but these could have been lawyers as well as industrialists. Even if we assume that the mediators had a strong influence on the negotiations, the decision to appoint Hitler after the negotiations lay with Hindenburg alone.

The second and more important question, therefore, is

whether representatives of industry and finance persuaded Hindenburg to appoint Hitler. Such attempts were doubtless made. In November 1932 leading industrial representatives had asked Hindenburg in a letter to appoint Hitler head of a presidential cabinet. But it is most unlikely that such initiatives influenced Hindenburg's decision. Hindenburg despised industrialists and bankers and disliked following their advice. There were no industrialists in his political or personal entourage. Rather, his advisers were civil servants and army officers, his friends were landowners. The latter were especially influential at the end. The landowners opposed Schleicher because he wanted to cut the subvention of public money for the indebted landholders of East Elbia. There is plenty of evidence for this, and if Hindenburg was at all influenced in his decision making by the promptings of special interest groups, then it was by landed rather than by industrial interests. In saying this, we do not, however, intend to assign to landed interests the role that industry plays in various other explanations.

Another possibility in defining the role played by industry is that it paid Hitler and thus helped him to become a powerful political factor. We will postpone this question until we consider Hitler's electoral successes.

Let us return to the question how Papen came to conduct the negotiations for the formation of the government. The first factor was Hindenburg's confidence in him. Another precondition was the fact that the state apparatus had become largely autonomous. Here I shall follow Karl Marx in differentiating between state power and state apparatus. State power is the ability to pass laws and directives, which are then executed by the state apparatus. This state apparatus consists of the civil service, the judiciary, the army, and the police. All of them are subject to directives. Generally speaking, the state power is exercised by the ruling classes or, in a democracy, by those who are elected by the majority of the population. They

then direct the state apparatus by giving it instructions. If the state power, however, is not clearly exercised by one group, or if the population cannot agree on whom to entrust with the state power, then that state apparatus becomes more or less free from directives, more or less independent. This became increasingly the case in the Weimar Republic.

One particularly clear example of this is Kurt von Schleicher's political role. Originally an army officer, later a leading official in the Ministry of Defense, Schleicher gained influence because the political parties left him without instructions. Although it was not his job, in 1932 he recommended to Hindenburg that Papen be appointed Chancellor, thus providing Papen with the influential position that later enabled him to form the Hitler cabinet.

Schleicher and Papen were not party representatives. Schleicher belonged to the state apparatus; Papen was, as we have said, a private person with no party affiliation. The normal party competition for state power had been replaced by personal rivalries and intrigues. Even the position of the president had become independent. He had, of course, gained a share of state power by being elected. But this part was normally checked by parliament, which held another and larger share of state power. It was parliament that had the authority to determine which government the president was to appoint. By resigning this right, parliament shifted its share of state power to the president. Hindenburg had not competed for this share; it had fallen into his lap. Consequently, he had more or less the entire state power at his disposal. He in turn handed it over in large measure to the state apparatus. Thus the people around Hindenburg were able to increase their power. This was the case not only with Schleicher and Papen but also with Otto Meißner, the president's secretary of state, with other civil servants, and with Oskar, the president's son, who as a cynic remarked had not been provided for in the constitution.

None of Hindenburg's advisers or confidants was a Nazi; none wanted Hitler to come to power. They had profited from the situation as it had arisen and were free to steer a course of conservative reaction. But this course failed under conditions of economic crisis and rendered the state ungovernable. Then, confronted with chaos and fearing a communist revolution, Hindenburg and his associates saw no other way out of the crisis that they had to a great extent produced than to recommend Hitler, who had become a powerful factor as a result of that crisis and the electorate's response to it.

#### THE VOTER SUPPORT FOR HITLER

When we consider the electoral success of the Nazi party, we must remember that the Nazis had been a splinter party until 1929. During the Reichstag elections of 1924 they had been banned, Hitler was still in prison, and the substitute organization won 3.0 percent of the votes. In the Reichstag elections of 1928 this percentage dropped to 2.6. Under normal procedures this Nazi representation in parliament would not have changed until 1932, but Brüning's failure in July 1930 meant new elections. Hitler's breakthrough on the national level, after limited success in local and regional elections, came during the election of September 1930. The number of Nazi votes rose from 800,000 to 6.4 million, their proportion of the total from 2.6 to 18.3 percent, the number of Nazi seats from 12 to 107. This was the greatest increase ever gained by a party from one election to the next in German history. This trend continued in the elections to provincial diets in 1931. It reached its peak in Oldenburg, where the Nazi party gained 37.2 percent of the votes.

In 1932, five major elections were held, two for the office of president, two for the renewal of the Reichstag, and one to the Prussian diet. Hitler won 31.1 percent of the votes on the first ballot of the presidential election on March 13 and 36.8 per-

cent on the second ballot on April 10. A fortnight later the Nazis won 36.6 percent in the Prussian election. They reached 37.3 percent in the Reichstag election on July 31; this was the largest percentage the Nazis ever won in free elections. Compared with the results of the previous Reichstag election, their gains had more than doubled and thus set another record. (The number of Nazi seats in parliament rose from 107 to 230, making the Nazi party the strongest parliamentary group.) These gains were then followed by an extremely remarkable development. In the election held on November 6, 1932, the Nazi votes sank from 37.3 to 33.1 percent, the number of Nazi voters from 13.4 to 11.4 million, and the number of Nazi seats from 230 to 196. Even though the Nazis remained the strongest party, the decline was considerable. Two million people had either abandoned them or not voted at all. It was only after this electoral setback that Hitler's party came to power.

Before we try to explain these developments we should remind ourselves that any statement about the causes of an electoral shift is to a large extent guesswork. This is true even more for the Weimar Republic in the 1930s than for countries today, for election research was then still in its infancy and opinion polls did not yet exist.

In principle a shift of votes can be explained in one of two ways. First, we can ask which parties gained and which parties lost votes, assuming that the gainers drew votes from the losers. The big losers in 1930 were the right-wing non-Nazi parties, which in Germany were called the bourgeois parties (*bürgerliche Parteien*). They lost three million votes. One could, therefore, assume that a good half of the Nazi gains came from there, but this is unsatisfactory because the overall number of votes increased considerably between the two elections. In 1930, 4.2 million more people voted than in 1928. Since the Nazis gained 5.6 million votes, the majority of these were not necessarily drawn from other parties. It might just as

well have been largely former nonvoters or new, first-time voters who brought about Hitler's breakthrough.

The picture is somewhat clearer for 1932. In the July election the total number of votes rose by 1.9 million, while the Nazi votes rose by 7.4 million. This time, therefore, the bulk of the new Nazi votes must have come from the other parties. Once more the so-called bourgeois parties were the biggest losers, including some that had managed to hold their positions in 1930. Their losses amounted to 5.3 million votes altogether. If the 1.9 million new votes are added, we have a total of 7.2 million votes, which almost accounts for the entire 7.4 million additional Nazi votes. As far as the parties on the left are concerned, the Social Democrats lost 618,000 votes and the Communists gained 691,000. Although it cannot be ruled out that former supporters of the Social Democratic party went over to the Nazis, it is more likely that they switched to the Communist party. But again it can safely be concluded that the bulk of the new Nazi votes must have come from the so-called bourgeois parties.

A second way of explaining a shift of votes is by electoral geography: We consider the constituencies and polling areas in which the Nazis gained more than their average increase and then argue from the social structure of those areas to the social structure of the electorate. Research in this field is in a state of flux. Nevertheless, recent studies, particularly Richard F. Hamilton's excellent *Who Voted for Hitler?*, demonstrate again that it was the middle classes, the more well-to-do rather than workers or the unemployed, who voted for the Nazis.

Before considering the motives of the Nazi voters, we should investigate whether industry contributed to Hitler's electoral successes. It is quite clear from a quick look at the several millions of shifting votes that they cannot be explained by financial support from industry. So many votes just cannot be commandeered. Moreover, the Nazi party was not on good

terms with industry. The industrialists' party was the German People's party, and in the presidential election of 1932 industry supported Hindenburg against Hitler. Industry saw its interests well represented by the Papen government. There is no doubt that after the Nazi party had become a powerful factor as a result of its electoral successes, industrial circles attempted to help it enter the government, recognizing that the party was both popular and antisocialist. But we have already expressed our doubts about whether these attempts had a great influence on Hindenburg.

In general, we can offer little more than guesses about the motives of the Nazi voters, but this does not mean our guesses must be random. The fact that the peak of the economic crisis and the peak of Nazi electoral success were simultaneous has always prompted the conclusion that there was a causal connection between the two. In fact there was, but not necessarily the one that has often been assumed. Previous analyses suggesting that the simultaneous increase in unemployment and Nazi votes meant that the unemployed tended to vote for Hitler have found no support in recent research. If on the other hand, as we have found, the Nazi voters belonged mostly to the propertied middle classes, then we must deal with a different set of motives. A more likely assumption is that the impoverished turned to the Communists or remained loyal to the Social Democrats, whereas those who voted for the Nazis were motivated not by actual impoverishment but by a fear of future misery.

This generalized fear may have included a fear of communism. It had definitely been the nightmare of the bourgeoisie, and not only in Germany, since 1917. Anticommunism was also a principal item of Hitler's public program. It is, furthermore, indisputable that the Communist party grew steadily. It was in fact the only party of this period that enjoyed an uninterrupted increase in the Reichstag vote. The party won 10.6 percent of the vote in May 1928, 13.1 percent in Sep-

tember 1930, 14.3 percent in July 1932, and 16.3 percent in November 1932. Unlike the Nazi party, the Communist party did not decline in November 1932. Moreover, it called for expropriation and promised Bolshevism, thus sowing panic among property owners. There is thus a strong basis for the suggestion that the economic crisis and the simultaneous rise of the Communist party drove many bourgeois voters into Hitler's arms. The people surrounding Hindenburg might have been motivated by the same fear, even though they did not favor the Nazis but rather suspected them of socialist tendencies. It is usually forgotten that in Hindenburg's eyes Hitler belonged to the left rather than to the right of the political spectrum.

Although the question of the social background of the Nazi voters and their motives is of great importance, it is not crucial to our main question—how Hitler came to power. The Nazi party was not a standard party that intended to represent the interests of its members and voters or those of certain social classes. Nor did it take these interests into account or formulate its political objectives according to specific class or group interests.

Rather the Nazi party was a movement whose followers let themselves be led by a charismatic figure without wanting to know exactly whether and how he would represent their interests. The party had no decision-making committees that passed plans of action. The party congresses were purely declamatory events. The party platform could not be changed after its proclamation in 1920. Since the führer was not elected after 1921, he was independent of any sort of organization, not subject to supervision, not answerable to anyone. He demanded and was given absolute obedience, and it is significant that his followers called themselves his retainers. The Nazi party was a movement of an almost religious character, with an uncontested leader at its head and obedient followers behind him. Hence its social structure is not of great impor-

tance. What is important is that its members never formulated their own political aims, but rather followed their leader in such increasing numbers that by 1932 he controlled the strongest party in Germany.

#### THE NAZI PARTY

Our analysis of Hitler's rise to power and the role of the voters forces us to look more closely at the Nazi party. How and why did this party come into being? This too is a complex problem. I shall restrict myself to a few points that are crucial for my argument.

The Nazi party, founded in 1919, was a product of the German defeat in World War I. This was true for the founders and again especially for the man who not only soon became the party leader but also made the party the basis for his career. Hitler was already thirty years old in 1919 and had not been previously interested in politics. That is unusual and supports the statement that he so often repeated, namely, that it was the German defeat in the war that led to his decision to become a politician.

In its ideology the Nazi party followed an older nationalist, anti-Semitic, and antisocialist tradition. Hitler used these components to formulate his own views, but these attracted little interest within the party and were almost completely passed over in silence after 1930. His supporters were held together by their common trust in their leader and his assurance that he would make up for the earlier defeat, punish those who were responsible for it, and lead the country back to its former greatness.

This brings us to the end of our first inquiry. Although we have posed simple questions, we have not found simple answers in the sense that Hitler's coming to power can be explained by one reason alone or that his rule was based on the support of one social class only. Actually, his rule was

more or less independent of classes altogether. Such regimes are exceptional in history, but Hitler's was not the first of its kind. The basic condition for his coming to power was what we have described as a stalemate—the approximate deadlock of the leading classes.

If history is seen as a series of class struggles fought for the possession of state power, then it follows that occasionally old classes decline and new classes rise. Within this process there is bound to come a time when the chief declining and the chief rising class are of almost equal strength. Then neither of the two main competing classes is able to direct the state alone, whereas each one can prevent the other from doing so. This is always a critical moment. In French history it led, for example, to the accession of Napoleon I and later of Napoleon III. In German history a similar stage was reached in the first third of the twentieth century, beginning even before 1914. The parties of the Weimar coalition had held the majority in parliament as early as 1912. They lost that majority in 1920 and almost regained it in 1928. Thus the struggle was long and not decided by 1933.

This long-term struggle between competing but evenly matched parties was complicated in Germany by two short-term extraneous factors. The first of these factors was the collapse of Germany at the end of World War I, which produced the Nazi party. The second was the Great Depression, which promoted the electoral success of the Nazi party and its leader, who by that time had become a charismatic figure. At this point the state apparatus was handed over to this leader by certain individuals who had gained possession of it as a consequence of the long-term political struggles. They acted without instructions from but in the perceived interests of the declining class. They hoped to be able to use Hitler and to control him, but they failed. It was he who took control of the state apparatus and later the state power, to establish a regime of terror.

## 2

### Hitler Wages War

Perhaps never in history did a ruler write down before he came to power what he was to do afterward as precisely as did Adolf Hitler. Hitler set himself two goals: a war of conquest and the elimination of the Jews. And it is well known that his rule was indeed marked by these two undertakings. In my book entitled *Hitler's World View* I dealt extensively with the formulation of these aims.<sup>1</sup> In this and the following chapter I shall concentrate instead on their implementation. In order to explain my approach, let me repeat one point from chapter 1. Human beings do not act only from personal motives. They act also, and above all, according to certain conditions. They cannot do everything they want to do. Of what they want to do, they do only what they can. We shall therefore analyze primarily, not Hitler's motives, but the conditions that enabled him to pursue his aims and the ways and means by which he did so.

We can formulate our inquiry in terms of two main questions. The first concerns the interior and the second the exterior conditions of Hitler's acts. The first question is, How was