1933: Hitler Comes to Power

Seventy-five years ago, Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany, and a 12-year reign of terror across Europe began. Could history repeat itself?

By Patricia Smith

On the evening of Jan. 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler, the newly appointed Chancellor of Germany, stood in a government building at an open window watching a torchlight parade of 25,000 Nazi troops march through the streets of Berlin. Thousands of Germans cheered as they marched by, and Hitler was giddy with delight. "No power on Earth will get me out of here alive," someone heard him say.

Earlier that day, the President of Germany, Paul von Hindenburg, had appointed Hitler Chancellor (similar to Prime Minister). Having won more than than 37 percent of the vote in the previous year's legislative elections, Hitler's Nazi party had enough power to effectively paralyze Germany's democratic government, which had been in place since 1919. Hindenburg hoped that by appointing Hitler, he could satisfy Nazi legislators and break the deadlock, while maintaining control of the government behind the scenes.

His miscalculation led to disaster for Germany, for Europe, and for the world.

How was Hitler, probably the most ruthless dictator of the 20th century, able to come to power in a democratic Germany 75 years ago? And could something like it happen again? To think about these questions, it helps to understand the circumstances in Germany at the time that helped Hitler and his Nazi party gain power.

Impact Of Versailles

By the early 1930s, Germany was in desperate shape. Its defeat in World War I and the harsh conditions imposed by the United States, Britain, and France in the 1919 Treaty of Versailles—including debilitating reparation payments to the victors—had left Germany humiliated and impoverished, with ruinous inflation eating away at its economy. The worldwide Depression that followed the 1929 U.S. stock market crash exacerbated the situation as banks failed, factories closed, and millions of people lost their jobs.

It all made for fertile ground for Hitler's radical nationalist ideology. The Nazis (short for National Socialists) promised to stop reparation payments, to give all Germans jobs and food, and to make them proud to be German again. And they blamed Jews for most of Germany's problems.

By 1930, when the Nazis won 18 percent of the vote, it was effectively impossible to govern Germany without Nazi support, according to Ian Kershaw, a history professor at Sheffield University in England. And that led to President Hindenburg's gamble to appoint Hitler Chancellor in January 1933.

Less than a month later, Hitler used the fire that destroyed the Reichstag, the parliament building in Berlin, as an excuse to declare a state of emergency and suspend democratic protections such as freedom of speech. (At the time, Hitler blamed the Communists, but many historians believe the Nazis set the fire themselves.) It marked, in effect, the death of German democracy and the beginning of Hitler's reign of terror.

Undesirables

Within months, the first concentration camp was opened in the Bavarian town of Dachau. The first prisoners were political opponents of the regime. But it wasn't long before other groups that the Nazis deemed undesirable were rounded up and sent away: in particular, Jews, homosexuals, and gypsies.

The SS—Hitler's elite paramilitary force—had long been terrorizing Germany's Jews, beating them up and vandalizing their businesses. The Nazis believed that Germans, part of what they called the Aryan race, were racially superior to Jews. In 1935, their racist beliefs became official German policy with the passage of the Nuremberg laws, which stripped German Jews of citizenship and laid the groundwork for the horrors to follow.

On Nov. 9, 1938, the Nazis orchestrated a nationwide wave of attacks on Jewish businesses, homes, and synagogues. Almost 100 Jews were killed, and thousands were arrested and sent to concentration camps. The night became known as *Kristallnacht*—the night of broken glass.

At the same time, Hitler was moving Germany steadily toward war. In 1935, he began rebuilding Germany's military, in violation of the Versailles treaty. In 1938, he annexed Austria and the Sudetenland, a region of western Czechoslovakia where many ethnic Germans lived, making both part of Germany.

Then, on Sept. 1, 1939, Germany launched a surprise attack on Poland and conquered it so quickly that the term *blitzkrieg*, or "lightning war," was coined. On September 3, after Germany ignored their demands to withdraw, Britain and France declared war. World War II had begun.

By 1942, a year after Germany began implementing the Final Solution—detailed plans for the systematic extermination of all of Europe's Jews—it had conquered much of Europe, from France to the outskirts of Stalingrad in the Soviet Union *(see map below)*. As more Jews came under their control, the Germans herded them into crowded ghettos in preparation for mass deportations to concentration camps across Europe, where they died of disease, starvation, and overwork, or were systematically murdered in the gas chambers. Six million Jews—the vast majority of Europe's Jewish community—ultimately perished in the Holocaust.

By the time the war in Europe (and in the Pacific, the war against Japan) ended in 1945, 48 million people worldwide had died, and much of Europe was in ruins.

These distant events still echo today. Indeed, with the world now facing great tensions and instability, the question of whether such a monstrous dictator could again come to power and threaten the world seems more relevant than ever, says Kershaw, the historian.

Lessons For Today

Around the globe, skilled politicians have been able to manipulate populist, nationalist, or racist feelings to advance authoritarian rule, according to Kershaw. In the 1990s, for example, the President of Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic, used nationalist rhetoric reminiscent of the Nazis to launch a campaign of ethnic cleansing and war in the Balkan region of Europe.

In recent years, President Vladimir Putin has gradually moved Russia in an authoritarian direction, and President Hugo Chávez has done the same in Venezuela, though his attempt to be named President for life was defeated in a referendum last year. In Zimbabwe, a once prosperous African nation now in ruins, President Robert Mugabe has used brutal force to stifle opposition and stay in power for 28 years.

But, as Kershaw points out, there are international organizations today that didn't exist in 1933—such as the United Nations and the European Union—that would put up some roadblocks to the rise of a dictator bent on world conquest.

Nevertheless, it's clear the world needs to stay on guard. "We always have to be watchful of a politician who announces that his country's destiny is determined by expansion, whether it's a land grab or a political and economic domination," says historian Peter Black of the Holocaust Museum in Washington. "Clearly, Hitler's statements as a politician were plenty concerning if people had taken them seriously."

Today, a key question for democracies is how to balance the fight against threats like Islamic terrorism with democratic freedoms. And that, Black says, is the second lesson to take from Hitler's rise to power.

"A politician who's prepared to sacrifice basic rights for security, that's something for a citizen of any democratic society to be concerned about," he says. "Whether you're looking at the Soviet Union or Germany, the move toward authoritarian dictatorship doesn't necessarily make the country more secure, and the cost to the population is very, very high."

TIMELINE

GERMANY: A TUMULTUOUS 20TH CENTURY

The 1919 Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I, imposed harsh conditions on a defeated Germany and sowed the seeds of discontent.

1920s–EARLY '30s

As the economy collapses, runaway inflation makes German money so worthless that it is cheaper to burn it than buy coal.

1933

Hitler is appointed Chancellor on January 30. A month later, he uses the February 27 fire at the Reichstag, the German parliament building in Berlin *(above)*, as a pretext to declare martial law.

NOV. 9, 1938

Three years after the Nuremberg laws strip Jews of their German citizenship, the Nazis carry out *Kristallnacht* ("the night of broken glass"), orchestrated attacks on Jews, their property, and their synagogues.

SEPT. 1, 1939

Germany invades Poland, and World War II begins. At the height of its power in late 1942, Germany occupies most of Europe, from France to Stalingrad in the Soviet Union.

1941

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7 prompts America's entry into the war. By the end of 1942, the German invasion of the Soviet Union stalls, and the tide turns against Germany.

1945

With the German army in retreat, Allied forces liberate concentration camps like Buchenwald *(above)*. Six million Jews from across Europe are killed in German death camps in what becomes known as the Holocaust.

MAY 7, 1945

Germany surrenders on May 7, and Japan follows on August 15, ending World War II. Western Germany is occupied by the Allies, the East by the Soviets; in 1949, Germany is formally divided into a democratic West Germany and communist East Germany.

1989

As the Soviet Union's control of Eastern Europe crumbles, the Berlin Wall, erected in 1961 to prevent East Germans from fleeing to freedom in the West, is torn down. After four decades of division, East and West Germany are reunified in 1990.

2008

A reunified Germany is part of the European Union and a member of NATO. Angela Merkel *(above, with President Bush)* was elected Chancellor in 2005.

1936: The 'Nazi Olympics'

Adolf Hitler tried to turn the Berlin Games into a showcase for 'Aryan superiority.' But a black American track-and-field star spoiled his party.

By Courtney Potts

To go or not to go? That was the dilemma facing the United States in 1936, when German Chancellor Adolf Hitler hosted the Olympic Games in Berlin.

There were plenty of reasons to stay home. Hitler's theories about the genetic superiority of blue-eyed, blond-haired "Aryans" were well known. German Jews were being persecuted in nearly every aspect of German life, and had, in effect, been banned from competing at the Games.

In short, Hitler's racist rhetoric and anti-Semitic policies flew in the face of the spirit of the Games. Would participating implicitly condone those ideas?

Reasoning that the Games should first and foremost be about athletics, the U.S. decided to attend—even though it was clear that Hitler's agenda had little to do with sports.

Hitler wanted to prove his theories of Aryan supremacy to the world. But by turning the Olympics into a two-week propaganda spectacle, he set the stage for one of the most famous moments in Olympic history: the brilliant performance of black track-and-field star Jesse Owens, who became the first American to win four gold medals in a single Olympiad—and shattered Hitler's Aryan dreams for the Games in the process.

Seventy-five years later, the "Nazi Olympics" are remembered for Owens's remarkable feat against the backdrop of the racial and political tension surrounding the Games, just three years before Germany invaded Poland to start World War II. The 1936 Games are also considered the start of the politicization of the modern Olympics.

"From the standpoint of the Games as a propaganda venue, it starts big-time in 1936," says Olympic historian John Hoberman.

Hitler's Rise

Germany had been selected to host the 1936 Olympics in 1931. At the time, it had a democratic government known as the Weimar (*VY-mahr*) Republic, which had been in power since Germany's defeat in World War I in 1918.

But when Hitler, the charismatic and anti-Semitic leader of the National Socialist (Nazi) Party, came to power, he turned Germany into a police state. Hitler had built his political movement from the ground up, starting in the 1920s. Germany and its economy were in ruins after the war, and Hitler, a persuasive speaker, promised a return to the powerful, militaristic Germany of the past, blaming the nation's ills, especially its ailing economy, on the Jews.

Through careful maneuvering, Hitler was appointed chancellor (similar to prime minister) in January 1933. Two months later, he forced through legislation that effectively made him dictator.

Once in power, Hitler wasted no time in remilitarizing Germany and carrying out his anti-Semitic program. In April 1933, the Nazis called for a boycott of Jewish businesses. Less than a week later, the Reichstag (parliament) passed a law requiring the removal of Jews and other non-Aryans from government jobs.

In 1935, the Nuremberg Race Laws stripped German Jews of their citizenship and prohibited them from marrying non-Jews. Hundreds of similar laws were passed, all with the goal of excluding Jews from German society.

Fearing that Jewish athletes would not be treated fairly in Berlin, the International Olympic Committee (I.O.C.) considered moving the 1936 Games to Rome or Tokyo. But committee members were persuaded by German promises of fair competition for all athletes.

In the U.S., President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was up for re-election in 1936, never weighed in on the issue. After much debate, the American Olympic Committee and the Amateur Athletic Union voted to go to Berlin.

The Games themselves became "the greatest publicity stunt in history," in the words of one *New York Times* reporter. Hitler spared no expense to impress the 150,000 foreign visitors who attended. He ordered all anti-Semitic signs—like those proclaiming *Juden sind hier unerwŸnscht*("Jews are unwanted here")—to be removed during the Games.

Kept Off the Team

His efforts were, by most accounts, successful. Visitors left with the impression that Germany was prosperous, well run, and hospitable. But in a report to Washington, the American ambassador to Germany wrote that Germany's Jews awaited the end of the Olympics with "fear and trembling."

As always, the Games started with the lighting of the Olympic Flame. And for the first time, in what has since become an Olympic tradition, the flame was lit in Olympia, Greece, and carried to the site of the Games by torch.

True to their promise, the German team had allowed Jewish athletes to try out, but only one—Helene Mayer, a half-Jewish fencer with blond hair—actually competed. Others were kept off the team on technicalities.

The biggest star of the Games turned out to be Owens, the son of a sharecropper and the grandson of a slave. He was born in Alabama in 1913; when he was 9, his family moved to Cleveland, Ohio.

By the time Owens graduated from East Technical High School in Cleveland, he had tied the world record in the 100-yard dash. As a sophomore at Ohio State University, he tied that record again and broke three more—the broad jump, the 220-yard dash, and the 220-yard low hurdles—on the same day.

The first day the 22-year-old Owens competed in Berlin, he won the 100-meter sprint. The next day, he picked up the gold medal in the long jump—after getting advice on how to improve his jump from Carl Ludwig "Luz" Long, a German athlete who ended up placing second to Owens. The day after that, Owens won the gold in the 200-meter dash. A few days later, Owens won his fourth gold, in the 400-meter relay.

The crowd greeted each of his four gold-medal wins with thunderous applause, and Owens's victories discredited Hitler's belief that Aryans would triumph in competition against "inferior" races.

For Owens, the trip to Germany was not his first experience with racism. Because of segregation in the U.S., he later wrote in his autobiography, Owens couldn't always sleep in the same hotels as his Ohio State teammates during road trips. And as for his reception at the Olympics, he wrote: "I wasn't invited to shake hands with Hitler, but I wasn't invited to the White House to shake hands with the president either."

The Berlin Olympics were "widely considered to have been a foreign policy success," says Hoberman, the Olympic historian. "I think that they did fool a lot of people into thinking the Nazis were less interested in war-making in Europe than they actually were."

During the closing ceremonies in Berlin, Count Henri de Baillet-Latour, president of the I.O.C., invited everyone to reassemble in Tokyo, Japan, four years later—but the 1940 Olympics never took place.

Nazi rule became increasingly harsh: "Undesirables"—including Jews, Gypsies, and homosexuals—were sent to concentration camps, where millions would perish. In September 1939, World War II began with Germany's invasion of Poland. Two years later, Japan attacked the United States, bringing America into the war.

The Beijing Games

Taking place 40 years after the birth of the modern Games, the 1936 Olympics marked the first major collision of athletics and politics at the Games. But it was hardly the last.

For the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, the Chinese government spent a record $40 billion to showcase the country's meteoric economic rise and emergence as a world power.

While there was criticism of the I.O.C. for awarding the Olympic Games to an authoritarian state like China, human rights advocates saw the Olympics as a chance to focus the world's attention on China's human rights abuses, including its occupation of Tibet and its restrictions on freedom of expression.

"The line from the I.O.C. on China was that giving the Olympics to Beijing was a form of constructive engagement that would help open the country up politically," Hoberman says. He notes that it hasn't worked out that way, with China even more politically repressive today.

'Inherently Political'

Derrick Hulme, author of *The Political Olympics*, says that in selecting China for 2008—and Brazil as the host of the 2016 Games—the I.O.C. is indeed making a statement, but of a slightly different sort: It's simply recognizing both nations as emerging global powers.

In fact, Hulme says, the Olympics in their modern form were intended to be political.

"The 1936 Games were simply a particularly dramatic moment in which the world recognized the incredibly close relationship between politics and sports," he says.

"The Games don't allow individuals to participate," Hulme adds. "Athletes participate on behalf of a country, so in that sense the Olympics are inherently political."

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