

### 3. THE INTERWAR WORLD

#### Nazi and Fascist Advances

**T**he Nazi and Fascist movements were unique in the history of Europe. Hitler and Mussolini introduced a new political philosophy: totalitarianism. Under totalitarian rule, all aspects of citizens' lives were controlled by the government. In a Europe committed to democracy under the Treaty of Versailles, totalitarianism would be a real threat.

Hitler's first move on the road to totalitarian dictatorship was to call for new parliamentary elections. He hoped to strengthen Nazi control of the Reichstag.

The elections were heated. The Nazis used violence and intimidation to try to influence and control the voting.

During the election campaign, the Reichstag building was burned down. The Nazis accused the Communists of starting the blaze, but the Nazis probably had set the fire themselves. At any rate, they used the fire as an excuse to repress the Communist movement.

Still, the Nazis only managed to get 44 percent of the votes in the campaign. But they remained in control of the Reichstag and continued to use terrorism against their opponents.

Hitler next moved to end the power of the Reichstag completely. In March 1933 he got the Reichstag to pass the Enabling Act, which suspended the Weimar constitution and gave him dictatorial powers for four years. From this point on, the German government was ultimately controlled by Hitler alone.

Next, Hitler and the Nazis turned against Germany's other political parties. Hitler would tolerate no opposition to his government and wanted to destroy any possible centers of resistance. One by one, he attacked and destroyed Germany's other political parties.

The Communists, who were thrown out of the Reichstag as a result of the Reichstag fire, were the first to go. Hitler then turned his attention to the Social Democrats.

The main source of power for the Social Democrats was Germany's trade unions. To undercut the Social Democrats, Hitler broke up German trade unions and

made them part of a huge organization that included both workers and employers. When some Social Democrats continued to try to organize workers, Hitler declared in May 1933 that they were committing treason and outlawed the Social Democratic party.

Hitler used similar tactics against Germany's other political parties. Within the next few months, the Nationalists, the Center party, and virtually all other German parties had either dissolved themselves or had been outlawed. In July 1933 Hitler declared that the Nazis were the only legal political party in Germany.

As he worked to establish complete control over national politics, Hitler also centralized the German government. He appointed Nazi officials to lead each of the states of Germany. These officials had complete power to rule over the states. At the same time, the Nazis took control of the German press and German universities.

*Nazi propaganda directed the youth to regard Adolf Hitler as the "savior" of their lives, strength, and talents. Hitler's youth activities stressed physical fitness, competition, and "defense sports."*



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Despite these aggressive tactics, most Germans supported Hitler. In the elections of November 1933, the Nazis captured 92 percent of the vote.

Many people found the strength of Hitler and the Nazi organization preferable to the disorganized German parliamentary system. They looked on the Weimar government as a complete failure. They found Nazi methods excessive at times but supported the Nazi goal of a Germany that was economically, politically, and militarily strong.

Hitler, however, still had to deal with some opposition to his policies. Most of it was centered in the Nazi storm troopers, the SA.

Many members of the SA had believed that their organization would be an important part of a completely new social order in Germany. In fact, Hitler gained his political power largely by appealing to traditional interests without fundamentally changing the German economy or society.

Some SA members grew upset at this turn of events. Eventually, the SA became

a powerful source of opposition to Nazi policies.

The SA was not only a powerful source of opposition to Hitler, but it undercut his credibility with the traditional German military as well. The mere existence of the SA made it look like Hitler did not trust the established military. Hitler came to view the SA as a liability.

In 1934 Hitler moved against the SA. On June 30 the leaders of the SA and hundreds of other opponents of Hitler were hunted down and killed.

The SA was disbanded and its power transferred to a secret police group called the *Schutzstaffel*, or SS. Another secret police force, the *Geheime Staatspolizei*, or Gestapo, was expanded. Through these groups, virtually all opposition to Hitler was eliminated.

After President Hindenburg died on August 2, 1934, Hitler assumed his office. He now held the two highest political offices in Germany and was free to do whatever he pleased with the country.

Once firmly established in power, Hitler

*The Nazi SS eventually became the means of party control in Germany and the occupied territories. Here the SS forms a chain from the Reichs Chancellory to the Kroll Opera.*



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and the Nazis worked to reorganize the German economy. As they had done with the government, the Nazis centralized the economy. This meant that farmers, industrial workers, and all employers were expected to answer to Nazi officials.

The Nazis especially wanted to end the conservative economic policies that Weimar leaders had used to deal with the economic depression. The Nazis put huge amounts of government money into the economy.

Most of this money went to develop armaments industries. In defiance of the Versailles treaty, the Germans began to produce huge amounts of new weapons. Hitler wanted to be ready for war against the western powers, which he thought was inevitable.

In the short run, the new production of arms brought prosperity to Germany. The German economy grew and inflation declined. By 1937 unemployment had all but disappeared in Germany.

As Germany rebuilt its economy, Hitler also worked on foreign policy. He believed that there had been two *Reichs*, empires, in German history, and he wanted to set up the Third Reich. Hitler proclaimed that the Third Reich would last for a thousand years.

Hitler had two foreign policy goals for the Third Reich. First, he wanted an *Anschluss*, or union, of the territories in central Europe that had formerly belonged to Germany. Hitler believed that Austria, the western edge of Czechoslovakia called the Sudetenland, and parts of Poland were rightfully German. He pledged to work to reattach them to Germany.

Second, Hitler believed that Germany needed *lebensraum*, or living space. He thought that Germany would eventually develop into the strongest power in Europe and would need vast additional lands in both central and western Europe to house its large population. Hitler was willing to go to war to fight for those lands.

Hitler's first attempt to expand Germany, however, ended in failure. In 1934 he supported a group of Austrian Nazis who were trying to overthrow the independent Austrian government.

The Nazis assassinated Engelbert Dollfuss, the Austrian chancellor, but

could not capture the government. For the time being, Austria stayed independent.

The Italian government was watching the developments in Germany and Austria very closely. Mussolini regarded Hitler's government with cautious admiration. He had no use for the western European democracies and thought that the future of Europe lay with leaders like himself and Hitler.

Mussolini, however, did not want Hitler to take over Austria. He believed that a united Germany and Austria would be too much of a threat to Italy. When a Nazi movement threatened the Austrian government in 1934, Mussolini sent troops to the border of Italy and Austria as a warning that he would fight against an Austro-German union.

Soon, however, Hitler's actions convinced Mussolini that a union of Germany and Austria was inevitable.

In March 1935 Hitler declared that Germany would no longer abide by the disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles. He increased Germany's military production and made plans to take Austria by force.

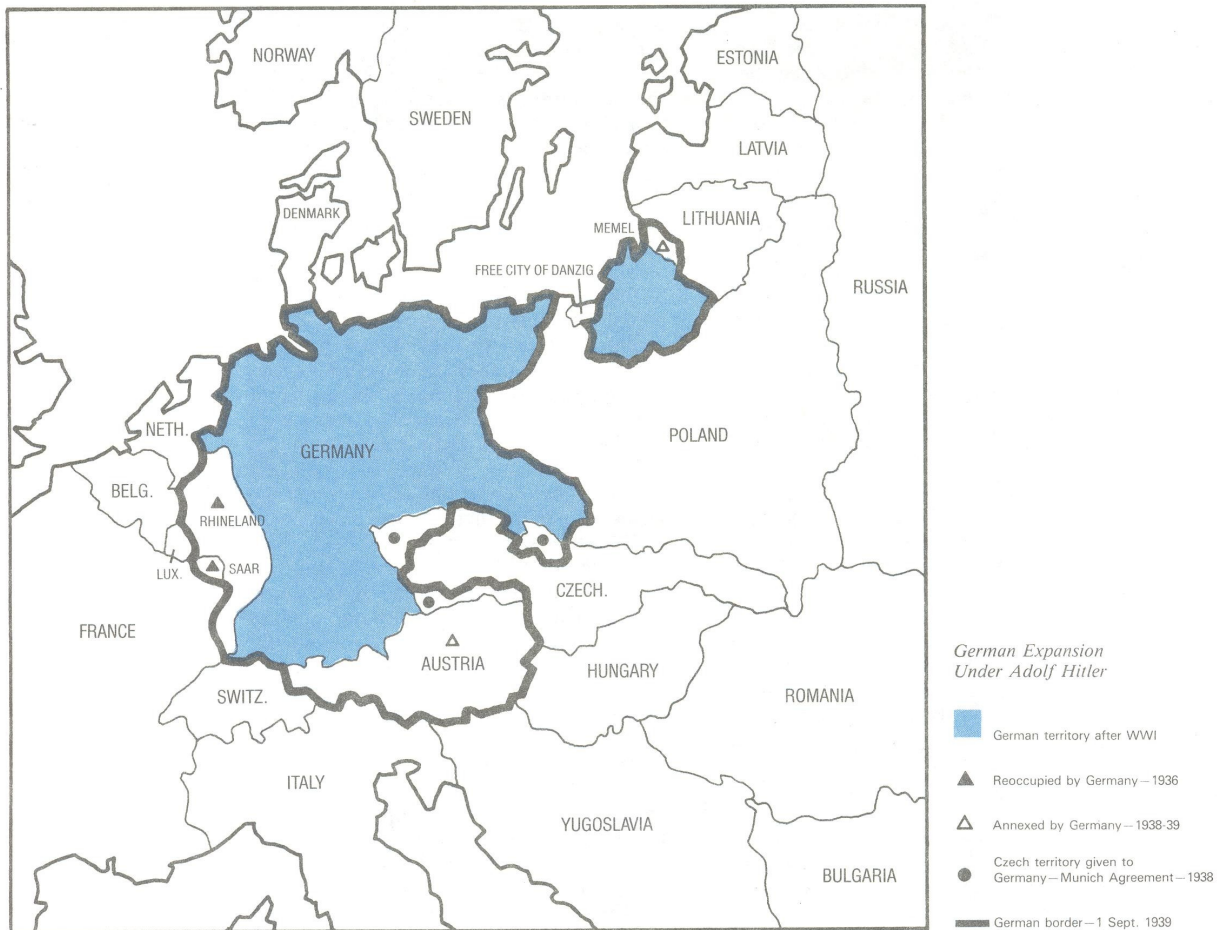
Britain and France condemned this move but refused to take any action against Nazi Germany. In June 1935 Britain signed an agreement with the Germans limiting the size of their respective navies. In doing so, the British officially recognized that the Treaty of Versailles was no longer in force.

After these events, Mussolini accepted the fact that an expanded Germany would probably be a reality whether he liked it or not. More importantly, he realized that Italy could never establish itself as a world power without strong allies. In 1935 Germany looked like the strongest possible ally in Europe. Gradually, Mussolini drifted into Hitler's camp.

Nevertheless, the Italian dictator was still determined to show Italy's strength. In October 1935 the Italians invaded the African country of Ethiopia. The Italians had been thrown out of the country in 1896, and Mussolini wanted to make Ethiopia the start of his imperialist expansion. The Italians quickly defeated the Ethiopians, and Mussolini became emperor of Ethiopia.

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The French and the British tried to use the League of Nations to oppose Mussolini's takeover. They supported the establishment of economic sanctions against Italy. But the sanctions were only halfheartedly enforced and did little more than anger the Fascists at what they believed was meddling in their affairs. Mussolini had proved his point about the weakness of the West.

In March 1936 Hitler made his first move. He sent troops into an area between

Germany and France called the Rhineland. The Rhineland had been demilitarized by the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler's action was in clear violation of the treaty, and he took a calculated risk that the French would not challenge his action.

The French voiced disapproval of Hitler's actions but moved no troops of their own to the Rhineland to counter the Nazi forces. Hitler's tactic had worked.

By 1937 totalitarianism was clearly a powerful force in Europe. Italy had expanded its empire, and Germany had proved that it was willing to use its renewed military strength. The stage was set for World War II.

### 3. THE INTERWAR WORLD: REVIEW

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##### A. Terms

DIRECTIONS: Write the significance of each of the following terms to the Nazi movement.

1. **lebensraum**

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2. **anschluss**

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3. **Schutzstaffel, or SS**

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4. **SA**

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##### B. Terms

DIRECTIONS: Match each phrase to the term it defines.

- a. Enabling Act
- b. Gestapo
- c. Rhineland
- d. Sudetenland
- e. Ethiopia

- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. western edge of Czechoslovakia
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. country invaded by Italy in 1935
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Nazi secret police
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. suspended the Weimar Constitution and allowed Hitler to act as dictator
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. area between Germany and France

