

The Reichstag Fire and the Impact it had on Germany, Adolf Hitler, and the Nazi Party

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the Reichstag Fire and the impact it had on Germany, specifically the Nazi Party and Adolf Hitler. This thesis examines if the Nazi's would have still been able to rise to power without the Reichstag Fire. The thesis will examine the other factors that contributed to the rise of the Nazi Party. These factors include: the Weimar Constitution, the public reaction, conditions in Germany, and the use of propaganda. The Reichstag Fire although expedited the process, was not the cause for the rise of the Nazi Party. Despite the Communist Party being banned in Germany after the Reichstag Fire, the Nazi Party was unable to gain a majority. It took a coalition between the National Socialist Party, the Center Party and the Nazi Party. This coalition allowed Adolf Hitler to pass the Enabling Act, which paved the way to the Nazi Party's reign.

Introduction

Typically, when thinking about Germany during the 1930s many people will recall Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party's reign. However, very few people are able to explain the long journey the Nazi Party had to go through before they were the only political party in Germany for over a decade. The National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP), also known as the Nazi Party was formed in 1919 started as a fascist political party that focused on strong German nationalism and a strong displeasure in the Treaty of Versailles, which was the Treaty Germany signed in 1918 after World War I. Adolf Hitler joined the group in 1919 as a member and quickly worked his way through the ranks. Hitler had the vision that this political party could rule all of Germany and take over the Weimar Republic, the democratic government that was in place in Germany during the 1920s.¹ His first attempt to gain power was The Beer Hall Putsch.² The Beer Hall Putsch was an insurrection started by Hitler that occurred on November 8, 1923. Hitler and the members of the Nazi party, which at the time was a minority party (they only had one seat in the Reichstag), forced their way into a political meeting in a beer hall in Munich.³ The goal was to start a revolution against the Weimar Republic, the government at the time. The march then went on to Marienplatz with three thousand Nazis where they were met by police officers. A bloody confrontation that resulted in nineteen deaths, led to the end of this uprising. Hitler was tried for treason and was given the most lenient penalty he could receive, five years in the fortress Landsberg.⁴ He ended up only serving eight months in prison, due to good behavior, but while he was there, he wrote his

¹ J. Burn. "How Did Hitler Become a Dictator?" *Hindsight*, April 2007.

² E. Kurlander. "Hindenburg: Power, Myth, and the Rise of the Nazis." *The Historian* 74, no. 1 (2012): 179+. *World History In Context*

³ J. Burn. "How Did Hitler Become a Dictator?"

⁴ E. Kurlander. "Hindenburg: Power, Myth, and the Rise of the Nazis."

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political book *Mein Kampf*. While this was a failure for Hitler and the Nazi Party, it helped him realize that if he wanted to start a revolution and become a Dictator, he will have to do it through politics rather than through violence.

Once Adolf Hitler left jail, his main goal was to reorganize the Nazi party. The Nazi party did not gain much popularity however throughout most of the 1920s. Even in 1928, the Nazi Party only had twelve of the seats out of six hundred sixty in the Reichstag.⁵ The German economy had been suffering since the end of World War I. While the Weimar Republic had put in different policies in an attempt to aid the economy. Initially, policies such as the Dawes Plan which helped Germany create a plan to pay their war reparations in a more manageable manner. However, the Germany economy would plunge again when the Great Depression occurred. Even though the Nazi party was not seen as a legitimate option to improve Germany's condition, this would change in 1929. When the Great Depression occurred, the effects were felt across the whole world. This event nearly destroyed the world's economy. This led to many German businesses going bankrupt and other companies scaling down employment, which led to a massive unemployment across the country.⁶ It also allowed extremist political groups to reach out to people and claim that they had the solution to these problems. This would jumpstart the popularity of the Nazi party, and the message that Adolf Hitler had become appealing to the masses of people. The Nazi Party, a party for the working class of Germany, suddenly became the upstart political group in Germany. In 1928 it only had one million members.⁷ By 1932 there were over thirteen million members that were a part of the Nazi Party. The Depression being a major one, with people panicking as jobs

⁵ E. Kurlander. "Hindenburg: Power, Myth, and the Rise of the Nazis."

⁶ J. Burn. "How Did Hitler Become a Dictator?"

⁷ E. Kurlander. "Hindenburg: Power, Myth, and the Rise of the Nazis."

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were lost and there were no solutions to turn to. People began to turn to extremist groups such as the Nazi Party. There were many other factors that contributed to the increase in popularity as well. The most important was the popularity of Adolf Hitler.

Through his fame from the Beer Hall Putsch and his history of serving as a soldier during World War I, Adolf Hitler was the strong confident leader that many people were looking for. The party used their growing support and were able to gain seats in the Reichstag, the German legislative body. In 1932, the Nazi Party had thirty three percent of the seats in the Reichstag, but could not gain the majority that they needed. The reason for the inability to become the majority because of the large number of political parties in Germany.⁸ In the Weimar Republic, there were multiple major parties including the Communist party, the Zentrum, which was the Catholic party, they were most moderate, the socialists, and the democrats.⁹ These parties all vied for multiple seats in the Reichstag and each group prevented one another from gaining a majority. By 1933, President Paul Von Hindenburg began to realize the popularity that the Nazis had across Germany. Hindenburg began to grow concerned that, as the economy continued to struggle and more people lost their jobs that an uprising may occur. In an attempt to appease the party on January 30th he appointed Adolf Hitler to be the Chancellor of Germany.¹⁰ At this point the Nazi Party was making progress towards their goal of taking over Germany, but there were still too many obstacles in their way. They needed to still find a way to gain a majority in the Reichstag along with a legal way to overthrow the Weimar Republic.

⁸ "Laws and Judiciary in Nazi Germany." In *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, edited by Israel Gutman. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 1990. *World History In Context*

⁹ R. Evans. "Hitler's Dictatorship." *History Review* no. 51, (March 2005), 20.

¹⁰ E. Kurlander. "Hindenburg: Power, Myth, and the Rise of the Nazis."

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On the night of February 27, 1933 in the middle of the night, in the middle of Berlin, the sound of glass breaking and the smell of smoke filled the city. The Reichstag building, the legislative branch's building in Germany, was set on fire but by the time the fire was put out, the building was mostly destroyed. This act put the entire nation of Germany into a panic, everybody suddenly became very concerned about the well-being of themselves, and were suspicious of everyone.¹¹ This was considered an act of terrorism and the police that arrived at the scene determined a Dutch Communist Marinus der van der Lubbe was the person that started the fire.¹² This event set in motion the political takeover by the Nazi party. Hitler was able to convince President Hindenburg to first, exile all communists from Germany. The message that the Nazi party sent to all of Germany was that the Communist party was trying to hurt Germany through trying to start a Marxist Revolution. As Hitler found out during his attempt to start a revolution, Germans are very much afraid of any type of a revolution, especially a Marxist Revolution. Although this created turmoil across Germany, the Nazi Party saw it as an opportunity to improve their political and social power. This was the first of many steps that the Nazi Party took, and many historians to this day debate whether the Reichstag fire was the event that led to the Nazi Party's rise to power. This is a question that is still being asked to this day.

Purpose of the Essay

The purpose of this study is to analyze the effect that the Reichstag fire had on the rise of the Nazi party and whether the fire is the main contributor towards the takeover of Germany by Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party. This study will examine how the Nazi party was able to take political control in Germany and turn a democracy into dictatorship over the course of two years.

¹¹ R. Evans. "Hitler's Dictatorship."

¹² E. Kurlander. "Hindenburg: Power, Myth, and the Rise of the Nazis."

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This study will analyze multiple aspects of the Reichstag Fire such as how it happened, the aftermath, and the factors surrounding the situation that made this event such an advantageous one for the Nazi party. The Reichstag Fire was not why the Nazi Party was able to takeover Germany, it was one of many factors such as propaganda the Weimar Constitution, the fear of the public, and an economic depression, all of these factors contributed to the Reichstag passing the Enabling Act, which is what allowed the Nazi Party's eventual takeover.

Weimar Constitution

In 1919, after World War I had concluded, Germany was in shambles. They had just lost the war and had to enter the Paris Peace Conference with very little ability to negotiate. On top of this, Kaiser Wilhelm II, the leader of Germany during the war abdicated two days prior to the war ending, thus leaving Germany in need of a new leader and a new government. On February 6, 1919 the National Assembly, which was voted on by the people of Germany in December of 1918, met in the town of Weimar to create a new government for Germany.¹³ Their first decision was to elect Friedrich Ebert as president of the government. His first job as president was to go to the Paris Peace Conference and represent Germany to negotiate a peace treaty. After months of negotiations the Treaty of Versailles was signed by all countries. Germany lost more than any other country as they had to eliminate their entire military, they were only allowed to maintain the equivalent to a National Guard. On top of this, Germany had to pay reparations to the victors of the war. These reparations were astronomical so much so that they were the main reason for Germany's economic collapse in the mid-1920s. Germany had to relinquish all of their colonies and were unable to join the newly formed League of Nations. However, Article 231 in the Treaty of Versailles may be

¹³ J. Burn. "How Did Hitler Become a Dictator?"

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looked at as one of the most illogical decisions made by the Allies in this treaty. Also known as the War Guilt Clause, it states "The Allied and Associated Governments affirm and Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies".¹⁴ Many historians look at this treaty as a major reason for a political party such as the Nazis to rise. Richard Evans author of *The Coming of the Third Reich* argues that if the Treaty of Versailles was better negotiated, then the Nazi Party would have been unable to rise.¹⁵ Regardless, the Treaty of Versailles played a large role in the formation of the Weimar Constitution and a complete overhaul of the German government.

The National Assembly attempted to create a constitution that provided more power to the people of Germany rather than just following the rule of a king. To provide the citizens more power, creating a Republic as the form of government made most sense for Germany. A Republic allows the people to vote for elected officials and they represent their interests in the legislation. The Weimar Constitution created a bicameral legislative body, the Reichstag and the Reichsrat.¹⁶ Along with a Republican government, there were changes as to the leader of the country. Universal suffrage was granted to all citizens, not just men.¹⁷ Along with universal suffrage, German citizens were provided with basic human rights such as freedom of speech, religion and the right to peacefully assemble.¹⁸ The German people would vote for a president to serve a seven-year term. The President had multiple duties that included representing German in international affairs,

¹⁴ R. Evans. "Hitler's Dictatorship."

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ J. Burn. "How Did Hitler Become a Dictator?"

¹⁷ . "Constitutions." In *Europe Since 1914: Encyclopedia of the Age of War and Reconstruction*, edited by John Merriman and Jay Winter, 692-702. Vol. 2. Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2006. *World History In Context*

¹⁸ J. Burn. "How Did Hitler Become a Dictator?"

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commander in chief of the army, he had final say on all laws that were passed, and the president appoint a chancellor.¹⁹ The Chancellor assumed a role similar to a modern-day prime minister. The Chancellor would preside over the Reichstag. However, in the Weimar Constitution he did not have much power, he needed the approval of the President to pass any bills or to appoint members to the cabinet.²⁰ As mentioned previously this is the role that Adolf Hitler was appointed to in 1933. The Chancellor's main role is to rule over the Reichstag and Reichsrat. If there were any ties in the voting, the Chancellor would be responsible for delivering the deciding vote. The other major role the Chancellor had was that if the President made any orders or decrees, the Chancellor had to approve the order.²¹ This prevented the President from abusing their power but there was less of a check, on the chancellor, which was one thing the Weimar Constitution did not consider. In theory, the Weimar Constitution should have been the start to the road to recovery, however there were major flaws in this constitution as well.

There were two articles in the Weimar Constitution that contributed to the rise of the Nazi Party. Article twenty-five in the Weimar Constitution gives the German president the ability to dissolve the Reichstag if there is cause.²² This article became very important once Germany fell into an economic depression. During the depression due to lack of a majority in the Reichstag, in the Reichstag, there were very few bills that were passed to aid the German people.²³ In response to little being done in the Reichstag, the president would respond by dissolving the Reichstag, relieving all representatives of their duties and holding a new election in an attempt to gain a

¹⁹ "Constitutions." In *Europe Since 1914: Encyclopedia of the Age of War and Reconstruction*, edited by John Merriman and Jay Winter,

²⁰ R. Evans. "Hitler's Dictatorship."

²¹ J. Burn. "How Did Hitler Become a Dictator?"

²² "Constitutions." In *Europe Since 1914: Encyclopedia of the Age of War and Reconstruction*, edited by John Merriman and Jay Winter,

²³ R. Evans. "Hitler's Dictatorship."

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majority in the Reichstag.²⁴ This was near impossible though due to the large number of political parties, with such varying point of views, that no matter how many times there was an election, there was no progress made. This caused major. This also led to voting fatigue across Germany as voter turn out shrunk into 1930. This did provide extremist parties a chance to grow as people became more frustrated, there was a sharp increase in membership in extremist parties, especially the Nazi Party. Article twenty-five in the Weimar Constitution allowed the Nazi Party to grow support over time as people became more frustrated growing from just one million members of the party in 1928 to thirteen million in 1932.²⁵ While other parties had low voter turnout, the Nazi Party continued to vote constantly gaining more representatives in the Reichstag with every election. This played a large role in why in 1933 President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler to become Chancellor. Once appointed Chancellor, Adolf Hitler was able to use the other flawed article in the Weimar Constitution to the advantage of the Nazi Party.

After the Reichstag Fire, President Paul von Hindenburg invoked Article forty-eight of the Weimar Constitution. Article forty-eight allows the president to suspend the German citizens' fundamental rights in the Weimar Republic if the public safety and order in the German Reich is seriously disturbed or threatened.²⁶ After the fire, President Hindenburg was hesitant to use Article Forty-Eight, but Hitler was able to convince him to suspend all of the citizens fundamental rights.²⁷ President Hindenburg announced this through the Reichstag Fire Decree and announced all the civil rights that were taken away. The civil rights that were suspended included: habeas corpus, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and the right to publicly assemble. Despite their civil

²⁴ "Constitutions." In *Europe Since 1914: Encyclopedia of the Age of War and Reconstruction*, edited by John Merriman and Jay Winter,

²⁵ R. Evans. "Hitler's Dictatorship."

²⁶ E. Kurlander. "Hindenburg: Power, Myth, and the Rise of the Nazis."

²⁷ Ibid.

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rights being taken away, the people of German accepted it as they felt that it was the best method to keep peace throughout the country. As Chancellor, Hitler was allowed Nazi publications to still publish newspapers during this time, The Nazi news outlets took the decree and relayed the information throughout Germany. The Nazis also took this opportunity to eliminate other media outlets that were not Nazi publications.²⁸ Any publication that spoke negatively of the Nazi Party Through issuing The Fire Decree, Adolf Hitler was able to use President Hindenburg to help the Nazi Party control the media and advance the Nazi Party towards total power. The Weimar Constitution helped advance the Nazi Party, and through Articles Twenty-Five and Forty-Eight, he Nazi Party was able to gain popularity and also advance the Nazi Party. Another major factor that helped the Nazi Party flourish was the desperation of the public over the course of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Public Reaction

Throughout World War I, German citizens not fighting in the war were dedicated to doing anything to help Germany succeed in the war. However, after the defeat there was a drastic change in emotion from the German people. As the Weimar Republic begins to form and the German citizens come to grips with losing World War I and the Treaty of Versailles, the people were clearly frustrated. As mentioned earlier the War Guilt Clause that was placed into the Treaty of Versailles placed complete blame of World War I on the Germans, this also meant that all reparations from the war had to be paid by Germany. Germany had to pay over one hundred thirty-two billion marks in German marks to the United States and the allies in war reparations.²⁹

²⁸ R. Evans. "Hitler's dictatorship: Richard Evans concludes his two-part account of the Coming of the Third Reich by examining how Hitler's position, and the state of Germany, was transformed in 1933." *History Review*, March 2005, 20+. *World History Collection*

²⁹ Green, Harold M. " The Rise of Nazi Germany." *International Social Science Review*, vol. 80, no. 3-4, 2005, p. 169+. *Academic OneFile*,

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This total in 1920 seemed impossible to pay at the time and it clearly frustrated the German people. Germans took great pride in how their country was perceived and after the loss of the World War, being looked like as the loser with very little power frustrated the Germans. As the Weimar Republic was beginning to reform Germany, they were received by the public with great skepticism. Initially, the Weimar Republic as able to reform the economy enough to benefit the German citizens. However, by 1925, the weight of the war reparations became too much and placed Germany into a depression.³⁰ This economic depression would place such a strain on the Germans that they began to question the Weimar Republic as conditions began to worsen leading up to the Reichstag fire.

Once Germany fell behind with their payments to the United States, their response was to instead put more German Marks into the economy by printing more money.³¹ Through printing more money, the Weimar Republic created extreme inflation in the economy. The value of the German Mark decreased severely and many German workers were left unemployed, a drastic change from when the Germans were fighting in World War I where there was a one hundred percent employment rate. German fell into stagflation which means that the inflation rate is high, however the economy was not growing, and the unemployment rate stayed high. As this continued into 1928 the German people had enough and were looking for solutions to the problem as the Weimar Republic's response to the suffering economy was to dissolve the Reichstag and hold new elections every few months. This led to German citizens trying to find solutions on their own, and this is how the Nazi Party was able to gain members to their party. As Germans became more extreme, the Nazi platform offered solutions to fix the economy. The

³⁰ E. Kurlander. "Hindenburg: Power, Myth, and the Rise of the Nazis."

³¹ The Reichstag Fire, February 27, 1933." In *Historic World Events*. Detroit: Gale, 2012. *World History In Context*

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Nazi Party had a scape goat for all of the Germans economic problems, the Jews.³² Hitler who was an extremely dynamic speaker would give public speeches at Nazi rallies and these rallies began to attract more and more people. Hitler blamed the Jews that lived in Germany for ruining the economy internally by being selfish with the money and the banks. He also made the members of the Nazi Party feel that it was German against the world as the war reparations were the main reason why Germany was in such a terrible economic depression.³³ Hitler and the Nazi Party wanted to start another war to help Germany regain the national pride that they had only two decades prior. Along with the pride that they lost, the Nazi Party also made it a goal to regain the colonies that they lost after World War I. By the time the Reichstag Fire occurred, as the world was on the verge of its own economic depression, Germans were looking for anyone that could solve their problems and the Nazi Party was there for people to rally behind. The Nazi Party's use of propaganda promoted the Nazi Party and they were able to market themselves to German citizens while also turning people away from their rival political parties.

Propaganda

When historians look at the Nazi Party, one of their most impressive attributes were their ability to use propaganda to promote their agenda. In a world without television and only print and radio, the Nazi Party made their message available to all Germans. Adolf Hitler had members of the Nazi Party only work on creating Propaganda.³⁴ Hitler recognized the power that using propaganda could have on the public. Hitler's first book that he published while he was in jail early in his political career *Mein Kampf* was a popular book that many Germans had.³⁵ In

³² The Reichstag Fire, February 27, 1933."

³³ R. Evans. "Hitler's dictatorship: Richard Evans concludes his two-part account of the Coming of the Third Reich by examining how Hitler's position, and the state of Germany, was transformed in 1933."

³⁴ Kurlander, Eric. "Hindenburg: Power, Myth, and the Rise of the Nazis."

³⁵ Green, Harold M. " The Rise of Nazi Germany."

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this book Hitler explained the problems with the Weimar Republic and how Germany lost its national pride. Hitler laid out the entire plan of the Nazi Party and how he was going to take control and create the Aryan Race in Germany. At the time of its release, many people saw this book as extremist political thought, however as people became more desperate for solution, *Mein Kampf* was seen as a more legitimate piece of work.³⁶ Other than the book, there was also a Nazi newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter*, which is German for the People's Observer, was published weekly for the public and it provided updates on the Nazi Party such as meeting times, rallies, and it would also have articles giving updates of what was going wrong in German.³⁷ During the time of the economic depression, there were frequent articles that were written during this time targeting multiple groups of people including the Jews, the communists, and the Center Party, which was the majority party in Germany throughout most of the 1920s. This newspaper gave the Nazi Party a way to stay connected across Germany and it also provided a constant voice in the public as these were for sale every week, even though German may not have been buying them, they were seeing them in passing. The use of print such as *Mein Kampf* and the Nazi's newspaper were an outlet that although started as a small group that would read slowly turned into a rapidly growing number as it was shared through word of mouth. However, as Hitler realized early on when leading the Nazi Party, propaganda such as the newspaper and *Mein Kampf* were a very valuable resource.

Adolf Hitler felt that there were multiple ways that propaganda could help the Nazi Party promote itself and expand its reach. Hitler states in *Mein Kampf* "The propagandist aims at inducing the whole people to accept his teaching. The organizer includes in his body of

³⁶ The Reichstag Fire, February 27, 1933." In *Historic World Events*. Detroit: Gale, 2012. *World History In Context*

³⁷ Green, Harold M. " The Rise of Nazi Germany."

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membership only those who, on psychological grounds, will not be an impediment to the further diffusion of the doctrines of the movement.”³⁸ Hitler felt that the propaganda that is created should reach out to everyone.³⁹ This can be seen in the propaganda that was put up throughout the streets in Germany. During the economic depression, the Nazi Party was consistent with their message and had scape goats such as America or the Jews. Hitler would use America because he recognized that very few people in Germany would argue that the French, who were responsible for forcing Germany to pay war reparations and placing Germany in this position. This is similar to the Jews; the Jewish community had been persecuted for centuries.⁴⁰ It became a common reaction in Germany to blame the Jews for their economic problems, since Hitler used his propaganda to make the Jews out to be the people running the economy behind the scenes. This led to extremely tense relations between both Hitler’s public speaking was such an effective talent that it became as effective as the propaganda that he used. He was able to work in much of the propaganda that the Nazi Party produced and he would be able to bring it up in his speech.⁴¹ Propaganda was used leading up to the Reichstag fire and it used the Reichstag Fire as a rallying point. However, the propaganda was a tool that was used for the entire reign of the Nazi Party as it was something that Hitler was emphasizing from the time, he took over the Nazi Party.

There are historians who argue that the Reichstag Fire can be seen as the turning point in German History and it is what catapulted the Nazi Party to its twelve-year rule in Germany. In his article “The Rise of Nazi Germany”, Harold Green argued that the Reichstag Fire was the turning point for the Nazi Party, as the German authorities arrested Marinus van der Lubbe, a Dutch

³⁸ Hitler, Adolf, and Ralph Manheim. 1971. *Mein Kampf*.

³⁹ The Reichstag Fire, February 27, 1933."

⁴⁰ R. Evans. "Hitler's dictatorship: Richard Evans concludes his two-part account of the Coming of the Third Reich by examining how Hitler's position, and the state of Germany, was transformed in 1933."

⁴¹ The Reichstag Fire, February 27, 1933."

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communist, that had immigrated to Germany.⁴² Despite the fact that van der Lubbe was clearly mentally challenged they charged him for burning down the Reichstag after he claimed that he did it on his own as a protest towards the Nazi Party.⁴³ Along with this, the Communist Party in Germany was banned as a result of van der Lubbe's arrest. On the night of the fire alone, over five thousand German Communists were arrested including Ernst Torgler who was the head of the Communist Party in the Reichstag.⁴⁴ This instantly eliminated one of the Nazi Party's largest political rivals and it also eliminated one of the only other major extremist political parties in Germany. The Communist Party in Germany held seventeen percent of the seats in the Reichstag at the time of the Reichstag Fire. However, although Green and other historians note the importance of this, it is the political moves that Adolf Hitler makes as chancellor that are what make this event seem so important in German history.

The Reichstag Fire allowed Adolf Hitler, who was Chancellor at the time of the fire, to convince President Hindenburg to issue The Fire Decree.⁴⁵ The Reichstag Fire Decree invokes Article 48 in the Weimar Constitution which states allows the president to suspend the German citizens' fundamental rights in the Weimar Republic if the public safety and order in the German Reich is seriously disturbed or threatened.⁴⁶ The civil rights that were suspended included: habeas corpus, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and the right to publicly assemble. The Nazi news outlets took the decree and relayed the information throughout Germany. The Nazis also took this

⁴² "The Reichstag Fire, February 27, 1933." t

⁴³ E. Kurlander. "Hindenburg: Power, Myth, and the Rise of the Nazis."

⁴⁴ "The Reichstag Fire, February 27, 1933

⁴⁵ Tinline, Phil. "The art of the big lie: From the Reichstag fire to Stalin's show trials, the craft of disinformation is nothing new." *New Statesman*, 16 Mar. 2018, p. 34+. *Academic OneFile*,

⁴⁶ "Laws and Judiciary in Nazi Germany." In *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, edited by Israel Gutman. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 1990

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opportunity to eliminate other media outlets that were not Nazi publications.⁴⁷ Through issuing The Fire Decree, Adolf Hitler was able to use President Hindenburg to help the Nazi Party control the media and advance the Nazi Party, this was just one of the many effects felt both politically and socially from the Reichstag Fire.

The Fire Decree was not the only piece of legislation passed as a result of the Reichstag Fire. Since becoming chancellor Hitler was looking for an opportunity to pass the Enabling Act. The Enabling Act would allow the chancellor to be able to pass legislation without the Reichstag's approval.⁴⁸ However, to pass this, a two thirds majority vote was required by the Reichstag to allow. The election held after the fire provided the Nazi Party with forty-four percent of the vote, which was an improvement from thirty-three percent in the previous election.⁴⁹ Also, the Communist party which held seventeen percent of the seats in the Reichstag, had trouble gaining any seats due to the suppression of the Communist Party throughout Germany. Despite the opening of seventeen percent of the seats in the Reichstag, the Nazi Party was unable to take full advantage of this opportunity gifted to them. They were unable to gain a majority in the Reichstag and at that point, Hitler realized that they would have to ally with the Center Group, who were relatively conservative. Aligning with the Center Party and the Socialist Party would give the coalition a super majority with over sixty-seven percent of the votes in the Reichstag. Although the Nazis Party eventually was able to take control of the Reichstag and Germany, the Reichstag Fire was not the primary cause. The other factors that have been previously discussed, set the path for the Nazi Party's eventual takeover. The Reichstag Fire was just an event that expedited the

⁴⁷ R. Evans. "Hitler's dictatorship: Richard Evans concludes his two-part account of the Coming of the Third Reich by examining how Hitler's position, and the state of Germany, was transformed in 1933."

⁴⁸ "Laws and Judiciary in Nazi Germany." 0

⁴⁹ "The Reichstag Fire Trial: 1933." In *Great World Trials*. Detroit: Gale, 1994. *World History In Context*

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process, however the Nazi Party would have still been able to take over Germany. The Enabling Act was the event that allowed Adolf Hitler to take over as Dictator and allowed for the Nazi Party's reign to start.

The Enabling Act was the law that would allow Hitler to legally rule as dictator, a goal that he had for over a decade. The Enabling Act allowed Adolf Hitler to pass laws without the approval of the Reichstag. However, to be able to pass this law, it would have to be approved by sixty-seven percent of the members of the Reichstag.⁵⁰ The 1933 election results were extremely important for the Nazi Party, the first election after the Reichstag Fire, with the Communist Party being banned, the Nazis were hoping that this would lead to a majority for them in the Reichstag.⁵¹ However, they were only able to receive forty-four percent of the vote.⁵² The Nazi Party at this point realized that they needed to switch their strategy politically to creating a coalition with other political parties in the Reichstag. The two parties that the Nazi Party allied with were the Socialist Party and the Center Party. The Socialist Party was a natural ally of the Nazi's as they had similar ideals, just less extreme. The Center Party deciding to join in a coalition with the Nazi and Socialist Parties was the decision that allowed the Enabling Act to pass. Historians look at the Center Party's decision to join as the party recognizing that this is the only way that change would occur in the Reichstag.⁵³ With all three of these parties creating coalitions, they controlled seventy-four percent of the vote in the Reichstag which allowed them to gain a super majority.⁵⁴ This allowed the Coalition to pass any laws presented to the Reichstag including the Enabling Act. With the

⁵⁰ E. Kurlander. "Hindenburg: Power, Myth, and the Rise of the Nazis."

⁵¹ R. Evans. "Hitler's dictatorship: Richard Evans concludes his two-part account of the Coming of the Third Reich by examining how Hitler's position, and the state of Germany, was transformed in 1933."

⁵² E. Kurlander. "Hindenburg: Power, Myth, and the Rise of the Nazis."

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ R. Evans. "Hitler's dictatorship: Richard Evans concludes his two-part account of the Coming of the Third Reich by examining how Hitler's position, and the state of Germany, was transformed in 1933"

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Enabling Act, Hitler was able to suspend the Weimar Constitution and rule as Dictator. It is a common misconception is that with Hitler becoming dictator, that the Weimar Constitution was abolished, however it was only suspended for over a decade and was not actually abolished until 1945. Although the Reichstag Fire did provide the Nazi Party to gain a majority in the Reichstag through the banishment of the Communist Party, it was not what caused the Nazi takeover. It is clear that the combination of the Nazi Party forming a coalition with the National Socialist Party and the Center Party forming a super majority in the Reichstag along with the passing of the Enabling Act was what can be identified as the events that lead to the Nazi Party rising to power in Germany.

Conclusion

The transformation of the Nazi Party from what it started as in 1919 to what it became by 1932 is something that came to the surprise of many including some of the members of the Nazi Party. However, the Nazi Party was able to take advantage of the mistakes of the Weimar Government such as the Weimar Constitution. The Weimar Constitution created voter fatigue throughout the 1920s as Article Twenty-Five allowed the President to dissolve the Reichstag if they were not doing their job. This caused lower voter turnout as the elections occurred every three or four months in Germany towards the end of the 1920s. Regardless of the Reichstag Fire, the voter turnout would have continued to decrease leaving members of extremist groups such as the Nazi Party along with the Communist Party. The desperation of the German would continue and it would have gotten to the point where the Nazi Party would have been able to gain a majority in the Reichstag over time. The only problem that the Reichstag Fire solved for the Nazi Party was eliminating their main competition which was the Communist Party. Through the arrest of Marinus van der Lubbe the Communist Party was eliminated through the Fire Decree from President

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Hindenburg. However, the Nazi Party at the time of the Reichstag Fire was more powerful in comparison to the Communist Party. Adolf Hitler was chancellor and the Nazi Party almost doubled the Communist Party in number of seats in the Reichstag.⁵⁵ However, where the Nazi Party had the greatest advantage was their ability to promote their agenda through the use of propaganda.

The Nazi's ability to use propaganda to their advantage is the most common factor that historians point to that argue that the Reichstag Fire was not what caused the uprising of the Nazi Party. Historians feel that it could have been any negative event in Germany that the Communist could be linked to, would have been exploited by the Nazi Party. For nearly a decade, the Nazi Party had proven that they were able to take events and spin the story into one that was most advantageous to the Nazi Party. This was a main contributor to their rise in popularity over the course of the decade prior to the Reichstag Fire. Hitler was such a dynamic leader for the Nazi Party that he was able to rally cities of people solely from his rallies that he gave impassioned speeches that would last for hours.⁵⁶ It is clear that there are so many different factors that lead to the Nazi Party's ability to rise, the Reichstag Fire was just another one of those factors rather than the primary turning point of the Nazi Party's rise.

Germany was in such a tumultuous situation after losing World War I, it allowed an extremist party start from a party that only had twenty people at it's first meeting in 1919 to being the ruling party in Germany in fourteen years. This is extremely uncommon however, there were multiple different factors that contributed to it. The Treaty of Versailles placed so much economic pressure on Germany that it launched Germany into an economic depression. Then the Weimar

⁵⁵ Conway, Daniel W. "Heidegger's Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany." *Political Theory*, vol. 25, no. 6, 1997, p. 855+. *Academic OneFile*

⁵⁶ E. Kurlander. "Hindenburg: Power, Myth, and the Rise of the Nazis."

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Republic, which was created after World War I, created the Weimar Constitution. In the Weimar Constitution, Article Twenty-Five created voter fatigue across Germany, as there were constant elections occurring every few months, as President Hindenburg frequently dissolved the Reichstag due to the constant gridlock due to a lack of a majority in the Reichstag.⁵⁷ This created frustration amongst the German people as the economy worsened and the Weimar Republic did not provide any solutions⁵⁸. This led to the Nazi Party and other extremist parties gaining members. The Nazis were able to differentiate themselves though because of their ability to use propaganda to portray the Nazi Party as the best party for the German people. This all led to the Reichstag Fire which led to the elimination of the Communist Party in Germany, and within a year Adolf Hitler took over as dictator of Germany. However, the Reichstag Fire was not why the Nazis rose to power. The Nazi Party was becoming an unstoppable force in Germany and something was going to eventually give. With the increasing membership of the Nazi Party, and the growing frustration of the German people was going to lead to extreme decisions at some point. It just so happened that the Reichstag Fire was that event, but that event could have been something different as well. Germans were looking for a reason for change, and the Reichstag Fire created it, but if the Reichstag Fire did not occur, the Nazi Party would have still been able to rise to power. This can be seen in the election results the month after the Reichstag Fire, where despite not competing with the Communist Party, the Nazi Party was not able to gain even a majority in the Reichstag. Although it did boost the popularity of the Nazi Party, it was not enough to allow them to pass the

⁵⁷ R. Evans. "Hitler's dictatorship: Richard Evans concludes his two-part account of the Coming of the Third Reich by examining how Hitler's position, and the state of Germany, was transformed in 1933."

⁵⁸ Pearson, Clive. "Hitler and the law, 1920-1945: Clive Pearson explains the process by which Hitler's will became the law in Nazi Germany." *History Review*, March 2008, 28+. *World History Collection*

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Enabling Act.⁵⁹ It took forming a coalition with both the National Socialist Party and the Center Party to form a super majority in the Reichstag.

Once the Enabling Act was passed the Nazi's had finally achieved control off Germany through moving up the ladder politically. It took years of propaganda being produced and distributed throughout Germany. It took advantage of an extremely flawed constitution, and exploited it to their advantage. It also used the public's frustration which had been growing for over a decade as the Nazi Party's membership increased yearly as people began to turn to extreme options. However, it was not just the Nazi Party but also other extremist parties such as the Communist Party. That was what made the Reichstag Fire such a crucial event The Nazi Party's biggest weapon was their leader Adolf Hitler, he had understood how the importance of winning over the public. He learned from his failures when attempting a militaristic revolution and recognized that if he wanted to rule Germany, he would do it politically. Hitler was able to play on the frustrations of the German people. For over a decade he made decisions to set him up for success. The Reichstag Fire may have expedited the process, however, his rise to dictator was not why Hitler became dictator but rather because he was able to create the coalition in the Reichstag and pass the Enabling Act. The Enabling Act allowed Adolf Hitler to suspend the flawed Weimar Constitution and pass any laws that he wanted as chancellor. Once the Center Party decided to align themselves with the Nazi Party and the National Socialist Party, the fate of Germany was sealed.

⁵⁹ Hett, Benjamin Carter. "This story is about something fundamental': Nazi criminals, history memory, and the reichstag fire." *Central European History*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2015, pp. 199-224. *Academic OneFile*

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